

Strangulation Romanticist  
Zerozaki Hitoshiki, Human Failure  
by  
Nisioisin

## Cast of Characters

Me (Narrator).....	Main Character
Zerozaki Hitoshiki.....	Psycho Killer
Atemiya Muimi.....	Classmate
Usami Akiharu.....	Classmate
Emoto Tomoe.....	Classmate
Aoii Mikoko.....	Classmate
Asano Miiko.....	Neighbor
Suzunashi Neon.....	Asano Miiko's Best Friend
Sasa Sasaki.....	Police
Ikaruga Kazuhito.....	Police
Kunagisa Tomo.....	???
Aikawa Jun.....	Humanity's Strongest Consultant

Me (Narrator)  
Main Character

"To have not loved is the same as to have not lived." Lou Salomé

"Dreams don't come true that easily."

"Course they don't. We're no match for reality."

"So hope, by definition, applies to things hard to obtain."

"Or because they're hard to obtain, they inspire hope."

- An excerpt from my conversations with Zerozaki.  
A mere fragment of what we discussed.

There was no need for it to have been a master of nonsense like me. Anyone who had any doubts about the world may have had an experience more or less along these lines. We spoke not of cheap emotionalism, vulgar sentiment, or miraculously commonplace synchronicity. We dwelt on mirrored reflections, the existence of which superseded conceptions and meanings of what was and will be.

No trace of reality, no fragment of inevitability, no scraps of logistics, no chuckles of white-washing, no bubbles of conformity, no words of foreshadowing, no delusions of resolution, no droplets of exposition, no iotas of common sense, no shadows of relevance, no passages of law, and less romance than anything else at all.

And yet it failed to qualify as nothing at all, a fact that is downright comedic. A comedy evoking pity and sorrow above all else.

For one thing, I think he was both untouchable and irregular. When I think of Zerozaki from a distance, I can only comprehend him in those terms. Without this understanding, there would be nothing more pointless than attempting to describe that human failure in words. Whatever he was, did Zerozaki actually mean anything at all? Just as this master of nonsense embodies an overwhelming lack of meaning, perhaps attempting to envision that psycho killer from an outside, objective perspective is the very model of a fruitless folly. How can I even begin to explain the sensation? The sensation of meeting one's self, of speaking words

to one's self, the ideas that lie at the all-too-on-the-nose heart of this strangeness.

Truly.

This was a chance encounter that should never have been.

It was an archetypal experience.

Words I'd heard for the first time.

A part of my own foundation.

A past comparable to suggestion.

Two parallel vectors from the same point of origin.

Something before the establishment of everyday.

And yet, like staring into a mirror.

I think we were a lot alike.

Our graphs matched so perfectly as to require no proof. And we were both all too well aware of this. From a subjective perspective, I was myself when speaking to him, and Zerozaki was Zerozaki. We were both nothing more, nothing else, and well aware of that fact. And yet at the same our selves blended, our own identity fusing with that of the other, a contradiction beyond the power of words to explain.

It lay on the opposite side of the water's surface.

Let us here introduce one innocent girl.

Look at her.

Imagine her first glimpse of the other side of the mirror. She would not imagine that other version of her to be a mere reflection of the light. She would imagine more than that. She would envision an entire world beyond that other surface. In her mind's eye, she would create a world not unlike our own, yet infinitely vast, oblivious to the contradiction therein.

It is not ignorance that allows the existence of that

contradiction. The difference between fact and fiction is so very inconsequential. Truth lays on one side of false, but that truth is but a fraud, and both are of equal value, equally valueless.

I think so.

And so did Zerozaki.

The sensation evoked by this, in simple terms, roughly describes my relationship with Zerozaki. We both perceived each other to be the same, yet in full understanding that we were very different.

"Perhaps I could have become like you. Maybe that's why you seem familiar."

"I believe I would never have become like you. That's where the appeal lies."

Another fragment of our discussion.

Nonsense, obviously.

In the end.

I am sure we absolutely hated each other. As only people horribly similar to each other can do. Because we each hated ourselves, loathed every fiber of our beings, cursed our very souls, we were ironically able to recognize each other.

A special case, I'm sure.

A unique event.

I was a bystander, and Zerozaki a psycho killer. Two opposites, on either side of the mirror.

But.

If that dreamer girl reached out her hand and touched the mirror, she would find nothing there but lies. An empty, fleeting sensation. The contradiction she had allowed would not be accepted by those around her. And worst of all, the contradiction she had

allowed was of no importance to anyone else at all.

That would teach her.

In that instance...

And I do not exaggerate.

The girl's world...

Would be destroyed.

So this is a story in which a world is destroyed.

A world destroyed for no better reason than the manner in which it existed, destroyed without the help of the blue savant or the red humanity's strongest. The fallout took the human failure and the defective product that had mistakenly created the authentic contradiction, and reduced them both to zero.

That's why...

## Chapter 1: The Viole(n)t Mirror

Zerozaki Hitoshiki

Psycho Killer



**My world is great.**

## 1

Rokumeikan University (a private college located in Kyoto's Kita-ku, Kinugasa) had three cafeterias in all. The most popular of these was in the basement of the Zonshinkan building (people called it Zonchi, for short) for the simple reason that it had the most variety to the menu, and was conveniently located near the co-op book store.

I had no second period class that day, so after my first period class ended, I headed for the Zonshinkan basement. To my shame, I'd overslept a full hour this morning, and been forced to skip breakfast; transitioning smoothly into an early lunch seemed like a reasonable plan.

"Nobody here at this time of day, knock on wood," I muttered, picking up a tray. Even as I said it, I became increasingly uncertain that this was an appropriate use of "knock on wood", but I let it pass, and moved on.

What to eat.

I've never really been what you'd call a picky eater; I can eat just about anything without complaint. Sweet, spicy, it's all good. But lately things have not been quite the same. A month ago I spent a week eating three meals a day of the best food imaginable, and the mouth-watering memories had left my tongue with some rather severe side-effects.

Specifically, for the last month I had not eaten a single thing I actually enjoyed. Everything I ate seemed horribly lacking, like a key seasoning had been left out.

I wouldn't go so far as to call this a real problem, but I was getting pretty sick of it. It was time for a cure. I had already come up with a cunning plan. Two cunning plans.

One simply involved eating something really good.

"But you can't really expect that from a college cafeteria."

In fact, this plan may well require me to return to that island

– a place as strange and unnatural as Panorama Island itself. I won't say I was actively opposed to ever going back, but I would prefer to avoid doing so for the time being.

"So plan B," I said, nodding agreement with my own internal monologue.

Plan B was a bit on the drastic side. It was more on the lines of beating a child that will not listen. After all, most problems can be solved by giving or taking away.

I stepped up to the donburi counter, and ordered. "Kimchi donburi, hold the rice." The lunchlady scowled at me. "That's just a bowl of kimchi," she said. But when I nodded, she shrugged and bowled it up. The kind of customer service one can only enjoy when absolutely no heart went into the preparation.

A mountain of kimchi in a giant bowl. No tongue on earth could retain gourmet-level sensitivity after being forced to deal with *that*. I nodded again, proud of myself, placed the bowl on my tray, and paid for it.

The cafeteria was so empty I was honestly not sure where to sit. In another hour, the place would be full of students who had snuck out of their second period classes. I would have to finish up before they arrived; never was one for crowds. With that in mind, I picked a seat at the edge of the hall.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered, and took a bite.

"....."

This...

...was gonna be tougher than I thought.

Did I really have to eat the whole thing...? Technically speaking, was this attempted suicide? What cruel twist of karma had forced me into this? What had I done to deserve this?

"...karma?"

It was my own damn fault.

I sat in silence, shoveling it into my mouth. I had talked to myself enough that day. People would start to notice. And talking with my mouth full was bad manners, anyway.

"....."

Then...

As my tolerance for this meal reached its limit, as the paralysis of my tongue spread to my mind and I began to lose track of what I was doing, who I was, what 'who' meant, and what meaning was in the first place...

"sup!"

She sat down across from me.

"Scoot your tray a bit?" she said. Even as she spoke, she was pushing my tray back to make room for her own. She had carbonara spaghetti, tuna konbu salad, and fruit for dessert – three dishes in all.

How bourgeois.

".....?"

I looked around. The place was still totally empty. Deserted, even. Yet she had chosen to eat her carbonara in the seat directly opposite mine. Had someone dared her to do it?

"Geez, what the...? Is that *all* kimchi...!?" she yelped, staring at my meal. "Holy crap! You're eating a giant bowl of kimchi!"

Her eyes wide open, she flung her hands up above her head dramatically. She may have meant that as a banzai sort of cheer, but it seemed equally possible she had simply chosen to surrender. For all I knew, she was Muslim, and praying for me. It didn't make much different to me what she intended, and it was always possible she had just been genuinely that surprised.

Her hair was shoulder-length, with crimson streaks. It was sort of like a bob, and sort of like a bowl cut. She was dressed normally enough, like any number of students around us; fashionably, I supposed. She seemed to get much shorter when she sat down; apparently she was wearing London boots.

Her babyface made it hard to get a bead on her exact age. She seemed a little younger than me, but since I was a freshmen myself, she must be at least my grade.

"...no reaction. Am I talking to myself here?" she said,

peering into my eyes.

"Um," I said, at length. "Who are you?"

I was pretty sure I'd never seen her before. I'd been here a month now, so I knew there were a lot of weirdly friendly people here. Part of the college experience or something. These people all acted like you'd been friends for years the moment they first spoke to you. With my lousy memory for faces, I was frequently a bit confused. I assumed she was one of the same. Probably recruiting for a club. Hopefully not something worse, like religion.

She reacted as if receiving the shock of her life. "Augh!" she wailed. "No waaaay! You forgot me? He forgot me. I am forgotten. Li-kun, how could you?"

Whoops.

I guess we had met before.

"Wow, I can't believe it. But I suppose I should. I knew it was possible. You've got the worst memory, Li-kun. I guess I should introduce myself again, then?" she said.

She thrust both palms toward me.

"Aoi Mikoko, respect."

Then she thumped her chest and threw up the horns.

"....."

I was better off not knowing her, I thought.

Regardless of whether we'd actually met before, that was my first real impression of Aoi Mikoko.

## 2

Turned out there was a simple explanation.

Mikoko was my classmate. Core classes, obviously, but we were also in language classes together. We'd met any number of times, been in the same group in the field trip before Golden Week, and in English we'd been partnered up a few times.

"Hunh...that makes it sound like there's something wrong with me. I should have remembered you."

"I certainly think so, ah ha ha."

Mikoko laughed easily. It took a particular type of mind to

laugh like that despite being completely forgotten. I figured she was probably a good kid.

"Mm. Normally, if people forget me, I'd be creeped out, or pissed off. But that's just who you are, li-kun. Like you don't forget things you absolutely can't afford to forget but forget things you'd normally have no trouble remembering."

"Can't deny that," I said. It was true.

I'd once forgotten whether I was right or left handed, and spent a meal switching the chopsticks back and forth, confused. In case you were wondering, it eventually transpired that I was ambidextrous.

"So, what brings you here, Mikoko? No class?"

"Class? Class..." she said, oddly happy. Maybe she was just always upbeat like this. I didn't remember, so I couldn't be sure. But it was hard to object to anyone who smiled like she did. "I'm playin' hooky."

"I think you should probably go to class. At least your first year."

"But they're so boring! Totally. I mean, it's Economics. Nothing but jargon. And some numbers. I've got no head for math! And you're skipping too, right?"

"I don't have class."

"You don't?"

"Only first and fifth periods on Fridays."

"Geez!" Mikoko's hands shot up above her head again. "Isn't that hard? You've got six hours to kill!"

"I got nothing against boredom."

"Hunh. There's nothing I hate more than being bored, but I guess it takes all kinds," she said, spinning her fork in her carbonara. It did not seem to be sticking. It could be a while before she managed to collect a mouthful. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than she put the fork down and started eating with chopsticks. Clearly, she was decidedly quick to give up.

"Um."

"Mm? What?"

"Lots of room in here."

"Yeah. It'll be packed soon, of course."

"But it's not now."

"Yeah. What of it?"

"I'd rather eat alone, so could you eat elsewhere?" I almost said, and then looked at her defenseless, open smile, a smile that suggested it never even occurred to her she might be rejected, and even my deep-seated poison took the day off. "Nothing," I said.

"? You're being weird, Ii-kun," Mikoko said, pursing her lips. "Course, never seen you not be weird. Being weird's the founding tenant of your identity!"

I felt like there was a silent insult hidden in that, but it was hardly as insulting as failing to remember somebody you'd known for a month, so I directed my attention back to my kimchi.

"You like kimchi, Ii-kun?"

"Not particularly."

"But that is a LOT. Actual Koreans don't eat that much kimchi."

"I have my reasons," I said, shoveling another mouthful in. The bowl was still more than half full. "Boring reasons."

"Oh yeah? Do tell."

"First, try and guess."

"Hunh? Um, well..."

Mikoko folded her arms thoughtfully. But coming up with a reasonable reason to eat an entire bowl of kimchi was easier said than done. She sat like that for a while, and then gave up and dropped the subject. She was really good at that.

"Oh, right, I've been meaning to ask you something. And since we bumped into each other... Do you mind?"

"Go ahead."

I was of the opinion that coincidence played a large part in 'bumping into' people, while as far as I could tell, Mikoko had deliberately chosen to sit across from me.

Or did she actually have a reason for coming over here?

Smiling still, Mikoko asked, "Ii-kun, you didn't come to school the whole first week of April, right? Why not?"

"Oh." My chopsticks hand froze in mid-air. The kimchi they'd been holding slipped and fell back in the bowl. "Um, well..."

I must have made quite a face, because she quickly waved her hands.

"If it's hard to talk about, forget I asked. I just wondered. That's me, always wondering things."

"No, it's nothing like that. It's simple enough, really. I was on vacation. A week out of town."

"Vacation?" Mikoko said, her eyes gleaming like a small animal in pursuit of cheese. Her emotions was extremely easy to read. Even I found her easy to talk to. Perhaps Mikoko was what they called a good listener. "Where to?"

"Just this uninhabited island in the Japan Sea."

"Uninhabited?"

"Largely. And as a result, I find myself forced to eat kimchi."

Mikoko crooked her head at that one. I was too lazy to bother explaining more, and wouldn't have known where to begin if she'd asked.

"Just a vacation. Not really a good reason."

"Hmm...well, I guess that explains it."

"What'd you think it was?"

"Oh, well..." Mikoko blushed. "I thought you'd hurt yourself and been hospitalized or something."

For a moment I had no idea how she could have imagined that, but then I realized that it was probably the most common reason for missing the first week of classes. Certainly a more realistic reason than "on vacation."

"But...like a late graduation vacation?"

"Yeah. Couldn't get a reservation, wound up delayed till April," I shrugged. This was a lie, of course. Graduation vacation? I

hadn't graduated anywhere since elementary school. But explaining that would take forever, and wasn't something I really wanted to talk about anywhere, so I settled for simply agreeing.

"Hmm," Mikoko said, nodding as if she didn't quite buy it. "Were you vacationing alone?"

"Mm."

"Okay." The clouds left her face instantly. She didn't hide a thing. She was so expressive I was kinda jealous.

Jealous?

No.

Not really.

"So, Mikoko...what did you want?"

"Mm?"

"You wanted to talk about something, right? Why else would you sit next to me when the place is so empty?"

"Hunh." Mikoko said, her gaze drifting down to my chest. "You have to have a reason to eat together?"

"Hunh?" Now it was my turn to be confused.

Mikoko continued before I recovered. "Am I bothering you? I was walking through, and saw you sitting here, so I thought I'd eat with you."

"Oh, I see."

She had wanted someone to talk to while she ate. I tend to see meals as personal time, and prefer to eat alone, but I was aware that most people see them as a chance to talk with friends. Mikoko definitely seemed like the type. And since she was skipping class, none of the people she usually ate with were here, so she'd wound up settling for the only person here she knew.

"No, I don't mind."

"Ah ha ha, that's a relief. I don't know what I'd have done if you'd said otherwise."

"What would you have done?"

"Mm? Hmm...well, for starters..." Mikoko mimed picking up her tray, and flipping it over. "Probably that."



"Hunh."

I knew she was joking, but I was glad I'd decided to let her sit. She might well have gone through with it. Anyone capable of being as totally happy as she was, might well be as demonstrative when expressing anger.

"Not like I was doing anything. I don't mind talking."

"Glad to hear it."

"So, what should we talk about?"

"Uh, well..."

Flustered, Mikoko began furiously toying with her chopsticks, trying to find a subject.

I might not remember it, but we'd known each other for a month, so it seemed likely that Mikoko had a decent grasp of my surface personality. What would she choose to talk about with someone so out of touch they thought soccer was baseball played with feet? I found myself weirdly curious to know.

At last an idea came to her, and she clapped her hands. "The streets aren't safe anymore, are they?" she said, brightly.

"Hunh? What?"

"Um, er...you know. The slasher. Even you must have heard, surely."

I hadn't.

The way Mikoko said it could well have provoked indignation if I had had the slightest idea what she was talking about. But where I should have been saying, "Don't be ridiculous! Of course I know!" I was more inclined to sulkily snarl, "So what if I don't know? Excuuuuuuse me."

"Um...Ii-kun? What's wrong?"

"Um, well...what slasher?"

Obviously, I knew what a slasher was – someone was going around attacking people at random. I could guess that something like that was in the news, and that this was what she was referring to.

"You're kidding!" Mikoko said, appalled. "Seriously, you're

pulling my leg, right? Playing dumb? There's been nothing else on TV for weeks. Everyone in Kyoto's talking about it."

"I don't have a TV. Don't get the newspaper, either."

"But you have internet?"

"Oh...I don't have a computer. Barely even use the ones in the lab here."

"My god, you're like a caveman!" Mikoko said, impressed. "Is this some sort of philosophic stance? Your way of life?"

"I wouldn't go that far. I just don't like owning things."

"Wow. Bad ass. You're like some ancient ascetic philosopher! Right on."

Mikoko clapped happily, but I doubt she'd react the same way if she knew the reason was that my room was too small to fit anything.

Newspapers pile up fast.

"You said everyone in Kyoto's talking about it...so the slasher's in Kyoto?"

"Yeah. Everyone's scared. Big panic in old Kyoto. School trips across the country bein' canceled."

"Wow. That's a shame."

"Six people have died! And they've got no leads! No suspects!" Mikoko said, excitedly. "Stabs them with knives and pulps their innards! Ewww! Terrifying!"

"....."

I was eating here. I suppose I shared some of the blame for this topic of conversation. But why exactly was she so happy to talk about people getting murdered?

That was scary, even if you didn't know anyone killed.

"Six. Is that a lot?"

"Yes! It's a really big deal!" she said proudly, even though she was hardly the slasher. "Maybe in foreign countries, this sort of thing is normal, but in Japan, we never have serial killers. It's like, sensational!"

"Hunh. I suppose so. I guess I have seen more cop cars than

usual."

"Yeah. There are riot police stationed around Shinkyogoku. I've never seen them there, except maybe for the Gion Matsuri."

For some reason, she giggled.

"Wow. I had no idea any of this was going on."

This sounded like the sort of thing that would delight Kunagisa. Kunagisa Tomo was one of my few friends...my only friend, really. At the tender age of nineteen, she had an unusually high interest in cases like this. She was a professional level electronic and mechanical engineer; an enigmatic shut-in with natural blue hair. Unlike me, she was always well-informed – information gathering was well within her field of expertise – so there was little point in me going to tell her. She would already know everything there was to know. And might well already be taking action to solve the case.

"When did this start?"

"Early May, I think? What about it?"

"Just wondering."

I put the last piece of kimchi in my mouth. My tongue – the entire inside of my mouth – had long since given up completely. I was pretty sure they'd not be so selfish as to deem anything eaten tomorrow unsatisfactory. But come to think of it, if my taste could be defeated by a single bowl of kimchi, then my senses were pretty flimsy things. I suppose it was all just moods.

"Thanks for stopping by," I said, putting my chopsticks down. "See you around."

"Ah! Wait! Stop right there! Where are you going?" Mikiko yelped. "Wait, Ii-kun!"

"Where...? I'm done eating, so I'm off to the bookstore."

"*I'm* not done eating!"

Certainly, she still had half her food left.

"But I am."

"Don't be mean! Hang with me till I finish!"

"Why would I waste my time like that?" I did not say. My

personality is simply not strong enough to say things like that. I am always one to go with the flow.

"Okay. Not like I have anything better to do." I wasn't even full, really. I might as well eat some more. "Wait right here, I'll get something else."

I went backwards through the cashiers (against the rules!) briefly considered ordering gyudon this time, but when I looked at the menu it cost more than Yoshinoya...as I dithered, the lunchlady cackled, "More kimchi?"

"Sure."

Oops.

Why did I nod!?

"Too late now."

Regret not what you have done.

A few seconds later I was back with Mikoko, another bowl of kimchi before me. An even bigger pile this time. The lunchlady had given me extra.

"Did you just want to see the look on my face?" Mikoko asked.

"Don't ask. What were we talking about?"

"Mm? I dunno. Forgot."

"Okay, then...let's talk about class."

"Hell no!" Mikoko said, shaking her head.

"Why not? I didn't really get everything they covered in first period today, might help to compare notes. All freshmen have to take that class, so you were there, right? If you ask me, that professor's pretty bad at explaining things. What do you think?"

"I think nothing! No boy in the world would talk to a girl about that crap, especially with no tests coming up!"

I had been mostly joking, but she seemed genuinely mad.

"I take it you're not big on studying?"

"Of course I'm not! Nobody is!"

"I think that's debatable, but Mikoko, if you hate studying that much, why go to college?"

"Holy crap. That question's verboten, you know. Never to be said. Ah-ah. But I think everyone here's the same."

Apparently I'd hit a little too close to home. Mikoko looked dejected. Come to think of it, I'd read somewhere that Japanese people didn't come to college to learn. It was simply time spent preparing oneself for society. She'd also said that college was basically mandatory education in Japan, and scoffed that college students were no smarter than grade school kids.

"Hmm. But looked at the other way, when you graduate elementary school, you already know everything the average college student does, but society has to carry them all the way through college for the sake of maintaining a first world economy. Isn't Japan great?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"You like studying, Ii-kun?"

I shrugged.

Of course I didn't.

I hated it.

"But it's not a bad way to kill time. To escape reality."

"I think most people would call study the kind of reality they want to escape," Mikoko sighed.

After that, she elected to concentrate on eating. For a while she quietly ate her salad.

Hmm. Was a plate of spaghetti, a big salad, and dessert on top of that really a normal meal for a nineteen-year-old girl? I didn't really know any girls I could really base that sort of judgment on (I'd known extremely picky eaters, massive overeaters, and even someone with perfect gustation, but nobody normal.) But Mikoko was neither too thin nor the opposite, so I suppose it was an appropriate amount for her.

"...it's hard to eat with you staring at me."

"Oh, sorry."

"I mean. I don't mind."

Mikoko continued eating.

As she got near the end of her meal, Mikoko began giving me searching looks. More obvious ones, anyway; she'd been shooting questioning glances my way since she sat down, like she had something she needed to tell me and was trying to judge my reaction ahead of time.

That's why I'd assumed she had something she wanted to ask...and apparently I'd been right.

Half-way through her dessert she made up her mind and put her chopsticks down. Then she gave me a sort of impish grin, and leaned forward, her face close to mine.

"Um, Ii-kun..."

"...yes?"

"I might or might not have a favor to ask you."

"You might not?"

"I do," she said, leaning back in her seat. "Would you happen to be free tomorrow?"

"If you define free as having no other plans, then I can't say I'm not."

"Evasive."

"Just the way I am," I said, chewing kimchi. "Let me simplify – I am always free."

"Oh good! You *are* free! Thank god!" Mikoko said, happily placing her palms together. If I'd known informing people I had no idea what I planned to do this Saturday could make them this happy, I'd have dedicated myself to it years ago.

Or not.

...this could get awkward.

I was about to get plans foisted on me.

"So you're glad to hear I'm free. Takes all kinds to make the world. The circle of life. Turn, turn, turn."

"Right. So, if you're free tomorrow, come hang out with me!"

Mikoko had not been listening. Her hands still pressed together, she turned the gesture into a plea. Flashing her dimples.

Almost like she was apologizing for inviting me. Few life forms would be able to refuse such an entreaty. They would willingly surrender.

"No," I said, heartlessly.

"Eh!? Why?" Mikoko yelled. "You're free, aren't you? Ii-kun, you have nothing else to do!"

"That's true enough, but I don't mind being bored. Sometimes you just want to spend a day doing nothing, right? Everyone does. Escape the pressures of the world, find some respite from the tyranny of phony human contact. We all crave that sometimes. Everyone has the time and the right to ponder the life they lead. I tend to spend more time doing that than most."

"But...but...but...you can't just refuse without even hearing me out! Like you formed a band in eighth grade but all the members were bass players!"

What a wonderful metaphor.

Mikoko looked like she was about to cry. There were actually tears welling up in the corners of her eyes. This was not a situation I found desirable.

I looked around. The Zonshinkan basement cafeteria was starting to fill up. If we attracted attention (say, if I made a comparatively attractive girl cry) then things could get ugly. Christ, who cried over a little rejection?

"Calm down, Mikoko. I'll hear you out. Have some kimchi."

"Okay..."

Mikoko obediently placed a piece of kimchi in her mouth. Then she yelped, and tears started rolling down her face. The spice had proven to be her weakness (as I'd expected).

"Holy crap, that's spicy..."

"Well, it is kimchi. It isn't kimchi if it isn't spicy."

Supposedly there was such a thing as kimchi that was only pickled in salt, but I had never encountered it. I intended to live the rest of my life without ever encountering such an abomination.

"Augh, you're so mean, Ii-kun. Teasing me like that. What

were we talking about again?

"The slasher?"

"No! Tomorrow!" Mikoko snapped, slapping the table. There was a flash of real anger there. Maybe I'd been pushing things a bit too far.

"So...you know Emoto?"

"I might know... her? But I don't remember her."

"We're in the same class. Her hair looks like this," Mikoko said, placing her fists on her ears. This pose gave me absolutely no clue what this Emoto's hair might look like. "She stands out. Only wears bright colors."

"Hmm. I don't really look at people. What's her full name?"

"Emoto Tomoe. Tomo from knowledge, E from wisdom."

That was the kind of name that would do a handstand and run away. I felt like I'd heard it somewhere before, but I had no great confidence in that. Worst case scenario, I'd say something like, "Oh, right, the girl with the contact lenses!" and she'd laugh, "Ah ha, no, I just made her up!" and then I'd look like a real idiot. I didn't think Mikoko would actually do that, though.

"We all call her Tomo."

"I'm against that."

"Mm? Why?"

"No reason. Personal preference." I shook my head. "Sorry, I really don't remember her."

"Thought as much," Mikoko said, laughing. "I mean, you didn't even remember me, how would you remember Tomo? I'd have been more shocked if you had remembered her."

I wasn't sure why that should be, but if I'd avoided shocking Mikoko, perhaps my memory wasn't so bad after all. Dubious logic, I know.

"Well...what about Atemiya? Atemiya Muimi. I call her Muimi."

"Another classmate?"



Mikoko nodded.

"And then Usami Akiharu. He's a guy, so you remember him right?"

"My memory is equally bad regardless of gender."

"But you clearly aren't that interested in girls," she sighed dramatically. But it didn't seem like she intended the sigh to be dramatic. I felt like I'd done something wrong, but it was my memory's fault, not my own. "Anyway, Tomo, Muimi, Akiharu, and little old me – four of us. We're having a drink up tomorrow evening."

"Celebrating something?"

"Tomo's birthday!" Mikoko said – for some reason, boastfully. The way she put her hands on her hips and puffed herself up was hard to not call cute. "May 14<sup>th</sup>! She's turning twenty!"

If they were classmates, then they should all be freshmen too; Tomoe must have spent a year as a *ronin* before entering Rokumeikan. Or have spent some time overseas like me. Not that it mattered.

"And my birthday's April 20<sup>th</sup>, so I just turned nineteen."

I didn't ask.

"So um," Mikoko pressed on, "Since it's Tomo's birthday tomorrow, we thought we'd have a little party for her."

"With only the four of you? Seems like a pretty small scale birthday party."

"Yeah, but none of us are really big on crowds and stuff."

"So four is pretty much perfect?"

"Eh?" Mikoko blinked at me.

"If it was five, might throw the whole balance off."

"Eh? Eh?"

"Give them my best wishes, obviously. Wish her a happy birthday for me."

"I will not! I mean, wait, don't stand up! We're not done talking!"

"I think I got the general idea..."

"That's not what I meant!" Mikoko grabbed my sleeve, and yanked me back into my seat. I really didn't see what else there was to talk about.

"Basically, you want me to come along to this drink up slash birthday party."

"Yes! How'd you know?" Mikoko said, acting surprised. This time she was definitely faking it. I was starting to wonder if her open nature was mostly a result of her being a really terrible actor. "It's like you're psychic, Ii-kun."

"Don't talk to me about psychics. I'm not a fan," I said, sighing. Then asked, "Why invite me? I don't even know any of them."

"You do. We're in the same class."

Oh, right.

Maybe I had some sort of amnesia. I never was very good at remembering people, but it was definitely getting worse. I don't think I clearly remembered a single person I'd met at Rokumeikan.

I suspect...

...that came from a lack of interest in people.

Not from any biological problem.

My brain was not defective.

There was nothing physically amiss.

I had simply been born broken.

"So I'm actually kinda friendly with the three of them, I just forgot about it? I don't think I'd actually go so far as to forget friends."

Mikoko gave me a forlorn look. "Not really," she said. "I doubt you've spoken to them much. I mean, you know how you are; always sitting with no expression, chin held high, eyes narrowed, like you hold the rest of us in contempt. Makes it hard to strike up a conversation, you know. You've built these walls around yourself. Deployed an AT Field. But you don't sit at the back of class, no, you sit right in the middle."

Mind your own business, seriously. If you thought all that, then don't talk to me. I wasn't going to say *that*, though.

I finished eating my kimchi. Two bowls was definitely too much. My belly felt unpleasantly bloated. I wouldn't be able to eat kimchi for a while.

"But you get along with me!"

"I do?"

"You do!"

Mikoko slapped the table again. With both hands, this time. Apparently she had a habit of hitting things when she got worked up. If I ever planned to make her mad, I'd need to look out for her swinging arms. Keep my distance. Perhaps even do it over the phone.

Why exactly was I making plans to make her mad?

"So of course, I've talked about you to my friends."

"I suppose you would."

"And when I talked about you, I explained that you were an interesting guy, no matter what faces you made in class."

"Stranger things have happened."

"And people want to be friends with interesting people, even weird ones."

"I see. Everyone makes bad decisions sometimes."

"So."

"So what?"

"Sooooo..." Mikoko said, looking at me expectantly. I pretended to drink some tea to escape her gaze. The tea was not at all successful at releasing my total mouth paralysis.

"Hmm. Well. I understand."

"You understand?"

"This seems like the perfect chance to spend the weekend visiting my family back home."

"Making sudden plans won't save you now! You didn't even go home for Golden Week!"

She hit the table again. I was curious how Mikoko came to

know how I'd spent Golden Week, but odds were I'd simply told her myself, and forgotten all about it.

"But, um, it's almost Mother's Day..."

"Mother's Day was *last* week! Like you even care about your parents!"

Quite a thing to say to anybody. Did Mikoko seriously believe the kind of nineteen-year-old who didn't care about his own parents would really be *nice* to a mere classmate? It seemed more likely she was simply too worked up to pick her words carefully.

"Please. I already told them I'd bring you. Don't embarrass me like this."

"I'm sure there must be some mistake, so let me just clarify – I'm not fun to talk to. I'm a nineteen-year-old cloudy deposit."

"Like, 'Two budding authors, one unfertilized, the other stinks of sulfur,'" Mikoko bit her lip, dejected. "Look, Ii-kun, help me out here. Obviously, this is a selfish request on my part, so I'll pay for your booze."

"I don't drink, actually."

This was true.

"Why not?"

"I chugged a bottle of Walker once."

I would not explain what happened after that, but as a result, I banned all alcohol from my life. I'm not the smartest guy around, but neither am I stupid; I learn from experience.

"Geeze, I thought only Russians did stuff like that," Mikoko gasped. "So you don't drink...then what...?"

She had to think about this one. She was well aware of what it was like to not drink around people who were drinking. Perhaps Mikoko herself did not have the highest tolerance.

Still.

Given how seriously worried she looked, I could not well keep my heart frozen forever.

Yeah. I was always easy to talk into things. It would be one thing if it was my emotions that led me to that, but it was really

more the situations. I just didn't have it in me to go against the flow.

"Okay. Fine. If you don't mind me sitting expressionless in the middle of the room."

"Yeah...I guess you're right. It's asking too much of you...wait, you mean you're coming?"

She nearly pounced. It was like a puppy sighting food. Cats would at least show some caution, wonder if it might be a trap, but Mikoko was instantly totally happy. Mikoko might look like a cat, but she was fundamentally canine.

"You really mean it? You're actually coming, Ii-kun?"

"Yeah. Not like I had other plans."

I was sure there was a better way of putting it; this was a little curt. But Mikoko was thrilled anyway. She thanked me profusely, grinning ear-to-ear.

I finished my tea. Mikoko had finished her dessert at last, so I rose to leave.

"Oh, wait, Ii-kun. Give me your phone number, I'll call you later."

"Mm? Okay," I took my phone out of my pocket. "Um, I forgot the number."

"Not surprised. Call mine then, the number's..."

I dialed the number she gave. A ring tone came from her bag. David Bowie. She didn't look the type, but apparently Mikoko had unexpectedly good taste.

"Okay, then. Wow, Ii-kun, you don't even have a strap."

"Yeah, not a fan. Too effeminate."

"Straps are effeminate?"

"I'd be hard pressed to defend that statement, but at the least, they aren't manly."

Mikoko nodded dubiously.

"Right, then," I said, picking up my tray. "See you tomorrow, Mikoko."

"Yeah! Don't forget me again, okay!?" she said, waving. With her full arm.

I fluttered a hand absently, and left the dining hall. Put my tray away, and headed for the co-op bookstore. It was a college bookstore, so their stock was primarily educational; not a lot of fun reads there, but they were ten percent off the cover price, which made up for a lot. And for some reason (really, why?) they had an unusually good selection of magazines, so the place was always pretty full.

I wandered back to the novel section, and picked up a book to look at before it occurred to me.

Belatedly.

"Hunh. Mikoko called me Ii-kun..."

A new name. Not a bad one. Mikoko had said it so naturally hadn't noticed, but I found it hard to believe she'd been calling me that all along.

The entire situation confused me. I had no memory of anyone calling me that, but I couldn't definitively say that nobody ever had. I didn't remember anything about Mikoko in the first place, so fine details like that were obviously not there.

".....whatever."

Things like that didn't really make much difference.

I convinced myself of that, and turned my attention to the book in my hand.

Yes.

It wasn't a big deal, not really.

It wasn't like anyone would die because of it.

The world kept on spinning.

Even if there was nobody up in heaven.

### 3

What can end a life?

Beheading?

Of course. Obviously.

Crushing the head.

Naturally.

Destroying the brain.

Inevitably.

Preventing breathing.

A perfectly fine method.

But when I say 'end a life', I'm not talking about any of these trivial inconsequentialities. I mean the kind of mortal blow that makes you a human but inhuman, a person unable to live as one, alive, but dead inside – the kind of blow that leaves you utterly lost. Where your own reason tells you everything is wrong, so wrong it consumes you, destroying all capacity for coping.

Your life has ended.

In other words, you have 'failed.'

And then you have to keep going.

The world is a bitch that way.

Brutally forgiving, diabolically accommodating.

Truth is, mistakes, no matter how big, don't usually kill you.

You only wish they had.

And so, not dead...

You suffer.

All you can do is struggle with the pain.

Which goes on, and on, and on.

Beyond all meaning.

Life is not a game. Not because there is no reset button, but because there is no game over. Even though your life was over long ago, tomorrow keeps on coming. First night comes, then dawn. When winter ends, spring arrives. Ain't life grand?

Not being able to die after receiving a mortal wound is the greatest contradiction of all. It would be like looking over your shoulder while traveling at greater than light speeds and discovering there was something back there to see. A state of inherent impossibility.

All possibility of being yourself long since gone, you keep going. You try again. You can always try again.

But each time you try again you make a sad facsimile of what you did before, degrading yourself in the attempt.

Eventually...

You wonder if you really are you, or if...

you became  
something else  
a long time ago.

Something degenerate.

Just as first person cannot become third.

You can't be a bystander to yourself.

And that what makes the wound mortal.

"...even if it's all in the mind," I muttered.

While mulling over these worthless thoughts, I tried the new burger at McDonalds.

The combo meal. 525 yen.

The kimchi I'd had earlier that day had restored my tongue to normal working order, and the burger tasted pretty good. It was like a requirement for anyone Japanese that they be capable of enjoying McDonalds.

It was seven thirty that evening.

I was near Shijo Kawaramachi, on Shinkyogoku.

After my fifth period class ended, I decided to check out the riot police Mikoko had mentioned as a way to kill time.

There was a magazine sitting next to my hamburger tray. A weekly news magazine I'd bought at the co-op bookstore. The cover said, "Special Edition: Kyoto's Own Jack-the-Ripper."

"Terrible headline."

I loved how awful it was, which was the second reason I'd bought it. Obviously, the biggest reason was to inform myself about the slasher Mikoko had mentioned.

I threw a couple of fries in my mouth, took a sip of soda, and opened the magazine. On the very first page was a gruesome picture of a corpse, with "**A Killer Terrorizes Kyoto**" in Gothic font draped over it.

How gross.

"...are they even allowed to print crime scene photos?"



I turned another page. I'd already read the article itself several times. I can't say I knew everything about the case, but I knew as much as they had to offer.

The media had blandly dubbed the slasher the Kyoto Serial Killer. Clearly, they'd been up all night inventing that one, but perhaps the fact that they felt no need to be creative showed how unusual a case like this was. The facts of the case certainly made it a better name than 'slasher' – as the name implied, 'slasher' incidents usually involved the use of weapons to assault others, but this killer lured victims into isolated areas and murdered them with sharp instruments, and then cut the bodies to pieces. This was far too lurid a case to take lightly; the Jack-the-Ripper comparison was not totally out of line.

"Six people...impressive," I muttered, putting the magazine in my satchel.

Six victims. Like Mikoko said, that was a ridiculous number of victims for a two week period. It was probably a new record. The first two were understandable, but from that point on the increased police alertness and riot police patrols should have made things much harder. Yet the murders went on, as if he was openly mocking the police.

There were no links between the victims. Young and old, men and women, no mercy shown. The police (and, really, anyone) saw the killings as indiscriminate.

And it probably would not stop at six.

This would go on. Until they caught the psycho, or some whim struck the psycho and made him stop killing on his own, these killings would continue. The next might be tonight, might be happening right now.

"All nonsense, in the end."

I looked out through the doors at the road outside.

Shinkyogoku looked like it always did.

It was late enough that the number of tourists was dwindling, but it was still pretty crowded. As the tourists and

students on field trips left, they were replaced with young people that dyed their hair. It was like the changing of the tides.

None of them.

None of the people out there believed they would be the next victim. Sure, they were taking reasonable precautions. The riot police probably made them a little nervous. They probably shook their heads at least once that day at the state of the world. They might even go home a little earlier than usual.

But deep down, they were all sure they'd make it home okay.

That's how people were. Not many people genuinely lived in fear of being murdered, and it was true the odds of it were low enough to be ignored.

"...so the victims were just unlucky?"

That sounded mean, but that didn't mean it wasn't true.

Anyway.

Time for me to join their careless numbers.

I stood up to leave, but the phone in my pocket began vibrating. I looked at the number, and didn't recognize it. I couldn't just not answer, though, so I pressed the button.

Instantly, an extremely cheery voice ripped out of the speaker. "Hey there! It's Mikokooooo!" I could almost see her throwing up the horns again on the other side. Actually, no, she probably wasn't that far gone.

But to start a call at that volume, without even hearing my voice...how did she plan to recover if she had the wrong number? A spark went off in my spirit of inquiry.

"Hunh...this is Mikoko! What's going on?"

"....."

"...um, Ii-kun?"

"....."

"Hello? Ii-kun, right?"

"....."

"Is this the wrong number? I got the wrong number!"

"....."

"Oh god, like doing aerobics in such a hurry you end up doing the funky chicken! I'm so sorry!"

"No, it's me. What?"

"Awk!"

Mikoko nearly shrieked at the sound of my voice. She spluttered for several minutes, and then finally sighed deeply. A sigh of relief, I guess. I braced myself in case that relief gave way to anger.

"Oh, man, you have to talk on phones! You had me worried for a minute there, you big meanie! Ii-kun the jerk! Ii-kun the megadick! Ii-kun the heel! Ii-kun the...the psycho killer!"

That last one seemed a bit uncalled for.

"Sorry, sorry, just a prank."

I hadn't really planned on staying quiet that long, but I hadn't expected her reaction to be so hilarious, and blew the timing on speaking up.

"Oh, all right. You are you," she groaned.

I felt a little sorry for her.

"So, um," Mikoko said. "Just touchin' base, here! Still on for tomorrow?"

"You don't have to yell, I can hear you. It's quiet here."

"Mm? Where are you?"

"Oh, uh...at home. My apartment."

"Hunh...I'm still at school. Had to stay after class to talk to Inokawa-sensei about something. I was in his office! Place is amazing! Books everywhere!"

Inokawa was in charge of our general studies class. Kind of an eccentric guy, way particular about time. (If you weren't sitting down by the time the bell rang, even if you were in the room, you were late. Even if you sat down before it finished ringing. Once it finished, you were flat out absent.) But that aside, he was popular enough.

"So, uh, about tomorrow, will you be at home?"

"Yeah. Should we meet up somewhere?"

"Nah, there's always a risk we'll miss each other. I'll swing by your place. I bought a scooter, so I'm dying for a chance to ride it around. I'll be by around four. Mind if I pick you up at your place around then?"

"Okay, but...you know where I live?"

"Eh? Er, um, yep, got it covered," Mikoko said, sounding a little rattled. "You know, first day of class we all had to fill out contact information, right? That's how I know."

"The address gonna be enough?"

"I know Kyoto like the back of my hand. Senbon Nakadachiuri, right?"

"Hunh..."

There was definitely something suspicious going on here, but if she knew that, then whatever. I agreed to the plan.

"Great, see you then. Um...I'd love to talk more, but I've got driving school now; have to be on time for my lesson."

"Oh? You're going to driving school?"

"Yeah. What about you, Ii-kun? You got a license?"

"Technically. Just for automatics."

I could drive sticks too, just didn't have the license. I let that remain my little secret.

"Cool," Mikoko said. "I'm trying for manual. Definitely at the age where it would be nice to have four wheels of my own. My dad said he'd buy me a car if I got a license. So, see you tomorrow! Bye!"

Mikoko laughed, and hung up. I stared at my phone a minute, then put it in my pocket.

Right. I'd promised to go to the party tomorrow. I'd hadn't *completely* forgotten, but I had forgotten enough that I wouldn't be lying if I said as much. At this rate, it seemed highly likely I would forget again before tomorrow. I might have to write "Plans with Mikoko tomorrow" on the back of my hand like a stupid grade school kid.

But if she was coming to pick me up, then it wouldn't matter if I remembered or not. I put the pen back in my satchel.

And at last I left McDonalds. It was nearly eight, so the shops were starting to close. Only then did it occur to me.

"Oh...a birthday party..."

I should probably buy a present, then. That seemed the common sense thing to do, but I have never really been a common sense type of guy. Since I'd been basically forced into coming, there wasn't really any *need* for me to be that nice. Still undecided, I stepped into a nearby souvenir shop.

Emoto Tomoe.

What kind of girl was she? I had no memory of her. I might remember her if I met her, but no matter how hard I racked my brains now, I came up with nothing. Which meant she was probably not all that eccentric. Comparatively mild, not likely to play with her phone or scribble notes during class. But wait, Mikoko had said she stood out, and always wore clothes with bright colors? Hunh. Nope, I had no clue. Not even the slightest idea what she was like.

And the other two, Atemiya Muimi and Usami Akiharu? I tried remembering them, but reached the same fruitless conclusion.

"If they're Mikoko's friends, they can't be all that weird."

Show me your friends, and I'll know who you are, to paraphrase Cervantes. The reverse was also true. I needn't be so worried.

So I grabbed a box off the pile in the shop. Nama Yatsushashi – specially seasoned mochi wrapped around red bean, folded in triangles. Thirty for 1200 yen.

"...hmm."

Kyoto equaled Yatsushashi, Yatsushashi equaled Kyoto. You couldn't called Kyoto Kyoto without Yatsushashi, which meant it was Yatsushashi that made Kyoto Kyoto. Yatsushashi was way more important than Kiyomizu-dera, the mountain with the kanji for big on it, or the Gion Matsuri. They were mere trifles in comparison. If you came to Kyoto without eating Yatsushashi, you were missing

out on 80% of what the city had to offer.

"...okay, then."

That decided Tomoe's birthday present. It would go well with the alcohol, and be eaten quickly; not doomed to take up space awkwardly. Or wait, did sweets go well with booze? I didn't drink, and wouldn't know. But there was no reason you couldn't eat them.

And then...

something behind me...  
sent a shiver  
down my  
spine.

Like liquid nitrogen injected into my spinal column. My whole body hit absolute zero, and the air around me suddenly felt scorching. I was being ripped apart by that contrast. If I were just a little less sane, I'd have lost my mind completely.

"....."

But I did *not* turn around.

Acting as naturally as possible, I took the yatsubashi to the counter. The clerk had brown hair, earrings, and a ponytail. With a genuine smile, he thanked me, and wrapped it. I took it, and paid – exact change. The clerk bowed his head, and said, "Come again!" He really put his heart into it. Capturing the hearts of tourists daily, this one, I thought, and left the shop, headed towards Shijo.

The sensation came with me. Once sensed, I could not ignore it; someone was watching me, in a way I could not ignore. And not just watching me...

They were going to kill me.

I'd felt this before, and knew how to recognize it; this was totally pure, unadulterated murder with my name written on it. It clung to my entire frame, ready to catch fire. Like being deeply uncomfortable, but more so.

I walked.

The sensation remained.

I walked.

The sensation remained.

"So he's following me."

Since when? How long?

I didn't know.

It was so obvious – I didn't need to turn around.

It was so obvious – I didn't need to focus on it.

He knew I knew. But he followed anyway.

"...dang it," I sighed, slipping through the crowds. I thought I'd left this kind of trouble behind, across the ocean. In this country, in this city, I had not expected to be followed, not expected anyone to be after my life. Kunagisa had checked that very thoroughly. I should be safe.

Which meant...

...it didn't have to be *me*.

The magazine in my satchel.

The slasher.

"...you've got to be kidding me."

This really had to be some kind of karmic backlash. To put it the way Mikoko would, like forming Spice Girls 2 but with only back up dancers. No, that makes no sense. I should stick to my own shtick. To do otherwise only brought confusion.

Yeah.

Even if the one following two hundred meters behind me was the slasher, or some other unrelated murderer, or even someone with a personal grudge against me...

Something was wrong.

Something didn't make sense.

Something about this didn't feel like what it seemed to be.

My senses were out of tune. It was like I was standing in front of a mirror and suddenly realized that my reflection was looking at me. Like I'd just realized I'd crossed a line I'd always taken care to stay just this side of.

"...nonsense."

My mind was playing tricks with me.

All that mattered was that I was being followed.

I was sure of that much.

And he was going to kill me.

I was sure of that, too.

With those two things certain, I couldn't waste time thinking about any other extraneous sensations. My choices were limited.

Give.

Or take.

"...this is getting old fast."

I left Shinkyogoku and headed down Shijo. A row of waiting taxis, stop and go traffic beyond them. Shijo was packed at this time of night, and it was faster to walk than drive. There were so many roads and traffic lights in Kyoto that you were almost always better off getting around by bicycle. Walking came a close second. Third place probably belonged to kick scooters.

I'd taken the bus here from school, so the second place option was my only option. I hesitated for only a moment before deciding to head east.

I waited for the light, and crossed Kawaramachi. If I kept walking east, I'd reach Yasaka Jinja. Kiyomizu-dera was a little south of that. The classic Kyoto sightseeing route. But I wasn't a tourist, and had no intention of walking all the way to Yasaka Jinja.

It tingled. Itched.

The killer's eyes on me. His very gaze was an assault.

"...can't take much more of this."

It May already, but I was drenched in a cold sweat. I was as stressed as stress could be. Certainly more stressed than I'd been since that weird island. But this stress was distinctly different from what I'd felt on the island.

This stress brought relief.

This stress brought a certainty that I would not fail.

I exhaled.

And reached Kamogawa. Instead of crossing Shijo Bridge, I went down the stairs, onto the bank of the river. When the sun was



out, the banks of the Kamogawa belonged to young couples, each spaced a respectable distance apart. It was one of the three most common sights in Kyoto. But now, by the light of the moon, drunks kept the party going. Stumbling out of the bars on Kiyamachi, folks of all ages waited to sober up down here.

Couples or drunks, they had in common one thing – their happiness caused trouble for others. This was not the time for such philosophical ruminations, however. What mattered was that this time of night was in between the couple wave and the drunk wave, and the river bank was deserted. The couples had gone home, and the drunks were still drinking. So this...

Was the ideal situation.

Under the bridge was even better.

I moved down the bank, into the shadows under the bridge. I could hear cars and footsteps overhead. People crossing the bridge. The noise was pretty loud.

But not loud enough...

...to drown out his footsteps.

The scrunch...

...of gravel underfoot.

"----- . ...."

I muttered something, and turned around.

" "

He made some declaration, and faced me.

The emotion I felt was confusion.

Ordinary confusion, nothing more, nothing less.

A mirror stood before me.

Or so I thought.

He was a little less than a meter and a half tall. Thin, almost delicate frame; hands and arms on the long side. Tiger striped capri shorts, workman-like boots that were clearly steel toed. He wore a

red long-sleeved hooded parka, and a black tactical vest over that. Gloves on both hands, not for wussy fingerprint concerns – these were half-fingered gloves, there for the simple reason that sweat could make his knife grip slip.

The sides of his head were shaved, and the rest of his hair bound in back, like a dancer. There were three piercings on his right ear, and two of what looked like cell phone straps hanging from his left. Stylish sunglasses hid his expression, but could not hide the obviously-not-temporary tattoo on the right side of his face.

None of this was *anything* like me.

The only things remotely similar were age and gender.

And yet it felt like looking in a mirror.

And so I was confused.

As was he.

He moved first.

His right hand slipped into his vest pocket, and an instant later was swinging a five centimeter blade towards me. No wasted motion – the very limits of what was physically possible.

The sound warped, the light bent.

If I'd been a third party observing this, despite knowing it was murder, I may well have described his movements as art – so perfect was his killing technique.

No way to dodge.

No way to parry.

Yet I leaned backwards...and the blade missed. This should have been impossible. I wouldn't say my athletic abilities were less than average, but neither were they more. I definitely possessed neither the reflexes nor the eye to see and react to an arm moving as fast as human muscles allowed.

But.

Imagine a dump truck was bearing down at you at 200 kmph. But if you knew it was coming when it was five kilometers away, then anybody could dodge it.

I grabbed my satchel, swung it round, and tried to hit him in the face with it. But he only had to tilt his head a little to avoid it, as if he'd known the blow was coming some ten years in advance. I'd put too much force into the blow to keep my balance, and wound up falling over backwards. But I wasn't stupid enough to catch my fall. If I wasted even one arm doing that, his knife would find its way home. As expected, he quickly turned his blade around and went for my jugular. This was bad. I had no way to dodge with my ass on the ground. I could roll, and dodge this one attack, but not the next one, or the one after that – no matter how much I squirmed, I'd end up with a knife in my spine. I could see it like that awful fortune teller saw her future.

There was no point in trying to dodge. Instead, I held up my arm, sticking my elbow in the path of the blade.

Then.

He twisted his wrist, deflecting the arc of the blade in a very un-arc-like manner. My elbow wiffed the air, exposing my entire body, heart, lungs, and every other organ.

Behind those sunglasses, his eyes smiled.

He twisted his wrist again.

The knife blade was aimed directly for my heart.

For a moment it stopped.

And then the tactile knife plunged down at twice the speed, too fast to the eye to follow, beyond the capacity of human perception.

I didn't even have time to gulp. I should not ever have had time to gulp.

But I knew this would happen *before I was born*.

"-----!" "-----!"

The knife pierced the top layer of my clothes and stopped dead. And so my left index and middle finger stopped where they were, sliding just under his sunglasses.

A Mexican standoff.

My heart, his eyes. Placed on a scale, the difference in

weight was obvious, but we had no scale. It would have been like taking candy from a baby for him to tear my flesh, pierce my bone, and stop my heart. But in that instant, my fingers would blind him.

That went both ways.

I could sacrifice my heart to blind him.

He could sacrifice his eyes to stop my heart.

Or we could do nothing.

We froze like that for five hours, or for five seconds.

"This *is* a masterpiece," he said, and tossed the knife away.

"It's nonsense," I said, and pulled my fingers back.

He stepped away. I stood up, and brushed the dirt off my clothes.

Like we'd choreographed and rehearsed the entire fight. Like the outcome had been evident ahead of time. The only relief I felt was the kind you feel when you finish with summer homework.

"I'm Zerozaki," he said, straightening his sunglasses.  
"Zerozaki Hitoshiki. Who the hell are you, doppelganger?"

It felt...

Like someone else...

Had just introduced themselves...

With my name.

This...

Was the first contact between the bystander and the psycho killer.

And wouldn't you know? It was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>.

Asano Miiko.

Neighbor.

Chapter 2 – Social Do(n't)s

**Unlucky and unhappy aren't enough.  
I need despair. Absolute darkness.  
Let me reach rock bottom.**

Actually, of all the days in the month, the 13<sup>th</sup> is the most likely to fall on a Friday. There's at least one Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> every year, and on average, there were three or four a year. As a non-Christian, as someone who wasn't even sure what the difference between a Protestant and a Catholic was, the 13<sup>th</sup> being a Friday should have no more meaning than the 14<sup>th</sup> being a Saturday.

Since it was.

The next day was May 14<sup>th</sup>, a Saturday. I woke up in my one-room apartment in Senbon Nakadachiuri. I looked at my watch, and it was ten minutes to four. In the afternoon.

"Seriously?"

I was a bit...no, pretty..., no, seriously surprised. This was a record breaking oversleep. It had been years since I even made it past noon. And not just past noon – I'd missed nearly a third of PM. This would be a black spot on my life for all time.

"...oh, right, I suppose I did go to sleep at 9AM."

My sleep-fogged brain was starting to function again.

Okay.

I sat up.

Four tatami and a bare light bulb. A beautifully antiquated room – a kind of anachronism, as if it had been here since Kyoto was the capital. Obviously, the rent was deadly cheap. Deadly to the landlord, not me. Deadly in the positive sense.

I folded my futon and put it in the closet. The room had no bathroom or toilet, but it had something you could call a sink, which I used to wash my face. Then I changed. I didn't own enough clothes to make choosing an option, so this took less than five minutes.

I opened the window and let the fresh air in. Kyoto was a

ridiculous city; the moment Golden Week passed you could safely call it summer. Like it was hanging on to the old calendar, or simply refusing to admit fall and spring exist.

There was a knock on my door. This building did not have any advanced technology like doorbells.

It was exactly four o'clock. Apparently, Mikoko was punctual. I was kind of impressed. When you brought punctuality to Inokawa-sensei's level, it was just obnoxious, but as a human being in general, it was worth being as least as punctual as an analog clock. Mikoko had passed Humanity 101.

"Coming," I said, sliding back the awesomely retro dead bolt. But when I opened the door, it was not Mikoko waiting.

"Sorry."

It was my next door neighbor, Asano Miiko. She was twenty-two, a little older than me, and of no fixed occupation. She had a taste for traditional Japanese clothing, and was wearing a *jinbei*. A black *jinpei* with 'carnage' bleached onto the back.

Her ponytail made her look even more samurai-tastic, and formidable – but once you actually spoke to her, she was actually pretty nice. Many things about her remained a mystery, but that just made me like her all the more.

"Miiko...? Morning."

"Were you sleeping?"

"Yeah, I overslept a little."

"It's far too late to say 'a little'," Miiko said, displeased. Her stony expression made it hard to tell what she was thinking. She was never quite expressionless, but the actual shifts in her default stern expression were so subtle she came across as perpetually poker faced.

"Come on in. Still nothing in the place, mind," I said, with boastless modesty, moving aside so she could enter.

But Miiko shook her head. "No, I'm just here to hand this over." She held out a flat box, with a souvenir shop's name written on the wrapper.

"....."

"This is yatsuhashi. Famous Kyoto sweet."

"I know that, but..."

"Take it. They're good. I've got to get to work."

She turned, showing off the *shura* on her back.

Why yatsuhashi, why give them to me...she never explained that sort of thing. She was a woman of few words, and the effort it would require to extract an explanation from her made it always far easier to simply accept the occasional puzzling behavior. So I simply thanked her.

Then.

Miiko stopped.

Without turning around, she asked, "You came home late this morning. Something happen?"

"....."

Thin walls suck.

"Nah. Spent all night talking to a friend. No secrets here. Nothing romantic either."

"A friend? Your friend would be the blue haired clingy girl came round in February?"

"She's a bona fide shut-in. Not Kunagisa. A guy."

"Hmph," Miiko nodded, like she wasn't interested at all. If I'd told her I'd met a serial killer under the Shijo bridge, she might have shown more interest...but Miiko might well have said, "Hmph," in exactly the same tone even knowing I wasn't joking.

And with that, Miiko walked off down the hall, headed for whatever part-time job she had scheduled today. When I found out that jinbei wasn't the uniform for some job, but what she normally wore, even I expressed surprise.

I closed the door.

But why yatsuhashi? It was from the same shop as the yatsuhashi I'd bought yesterday for Tomoe's birthday. A worrying coincidence, but presumably just a coincidence.

"Oh well," I said, and put the box on top of the other.



I looked at the clock. I was a few minutes past four.

Thirty minutes later it was thirty minutes past four.

"Obviously."

I rolled over.

Okay. So Mikoko was supposed to come and get me at four.

I was certain of this. I often forgot things, but I never remembered them wrong. Had she been in some sort of accident? Was she lost? Or was she just running on her own time? Whatever the reason, I was powerless to do anything but wait.

"Time for some eight queens."

Of course, I didn't have a chess set in this room, so I had to do it in my head. The rules for eight queens were simple and straight-forward. Place each queen on the board where it can't be captured by the others. Like aerobics for the brain. I'd done it any number of times, and theoretically knew the answer, but my memory being what it was, I could do it again and again with no diminishing returns. I wouldn't say it had ever been fun, but it did pass the time.

The first few are easy, but starting with the fourth queen things get tricky. They don't quite line up. Queens don't really get along, and are convinced there should only be one of them. But thinking about that sort of thing made it hard to remember where the pieces I'd already placed were, so I had to start over. Forcing my brain to compartmentalize like this was what I liked about it. It was like walking on a balance beam, but the more pieces you had, the closer you got to the right answer, the harder the game became, and the more points you felt like you were earning. And when you messed it up, the only one you had to blame was yourself, which was beautifully absurd.

While I was trying to figure out where the seventh queen should go, there was a knock at the door.

"Ii-kun!"

The chess board was knocked over.

The queens scattered.

I think my heart stopped for a moment.

I looked at my watch. 4:40.

"....."

I went over to the door, and opened it. This time, it was Mikoko. Pink camisole and a red mini-skirt. Lots of skin, yet somehow wholesome. She raised a hand in greeting.

Huge smile.

"Ii-kun, guten morgen!"

"....."

"....."

"....."

"Morgen...orgen...gen...like the doppler effect!" Mikoko said, her smile tightening. Her eyes began to wander avoiding my gaze. ".... Um. Are you...? This doesn't seem like you, but are you maybe angry or mad or pissed off or cursing my name? Maybe that last one does sound like you."

"....."

"I vote for communication here. If you just stand there silently it feels like you're about to do something terrible to me!"

"Palm."

"Mm?"

"Palms before your face, like this."

"...okay."

Mikoko did as I asked.

I pinched her hand.

She let out a very non-girlish yelp. That was enough for me, and I went back into my room to get my satchel. Now, where did I put the yatsushashi...

"You're so mean!" Mikoko said – for some reason, she came in the room after me. "I was only a little late! That doesn't justify violence! Like Japan introduced the jury system but all the jurors are Komawari-kun!"

Apparently Mikoko did not consider forty minutes a significant amount of time.

I had not invited her in, but she went ahead and sat down in the middle of the room. She looked around with interest. "Wow," she said, sounding impressed. "There's really *nothing* here."

"Not really the sort of compliment that makes me happy."

"You don't even have a TV! You're like some old starving student stereotype, studying by the light of the fireflies! Who else lives in this building?"

"Um, one girl who studies sword arts, an old hermit, and a 15 year old boy and 13 year old girl who have run away from home. Five of us in four rooms. There was a budding singer, but she sprouted, and moved to Tokyo to make her major label debut."

"More than I thought, honestly. So there's a room open at the moment? It might be a novel way of life. I should move in!"

How you could look at this room and arrive at that conclusion, I did not know. "I advise against it," I said. "Shall we go?"

"No, we're still too early," Mikoko said, hurriedly.

"But aren't we going to be late? It's almost quarter of."

"No, we don't have to be there till six. And Tomo's place isn't that far away, so we can hang here till five thirty."

"Really?"

"Yep!" Mikoko said, sticking up her index finger. A very phony gesture; I can't say it wasn't cute, but not enough to actually say it was. I didn't want to give her compliments and have them go to her head.

"Then why pick me up at four?"

"Eh? Um, well...lots of reason. I mean, I'm always late for things, right? Just in case."

"So, it was totally possible that you might have shown up an hour and a half late?"

The very thought chilled me to my bone.

Mikoko looked baffled. "What do you mean?" she said.

"Never mind. I won't suggest putting yourself in the shoes of the people you've made wait, or showing up at the time you

yourself suggested, or calling if you're going to be late, or taking proper care of chess boards, or anything like that."

She frowned when I mentioned chess boards.

Obviously, that one made no sense.

I found the yatsubashi in the corner of the room, unwrapped it, and put it in front of Mikoko.

"Can I eat these?"

"Sure."

I stood up, and went to the sink. I considered making tea, but I didn't have a kettle. I could have used a pot, but I didn't actually have a burner. So I filled a cup with tap water and put it in front of Mikoko.

"....."

Mikoko stared at the liquid like she couldn't understand it and then decided to pretend she hadn't noticed it existed at all.

She ate some yatsubashi thoughtfully.

"I hate to ask," she said, eventually. "But are you like, poor?"

"No, I have enough money."

You'd never guess it from this apartment, but I wasn't lying. I had enough to carry me all through college without having to work at all. I hadn't earned the money, but it was mine to use as I pleased.

"So you're just thrifty? Or a philosopher?"

"I don't really know how to use money. Like the opposite of a shopaholic."

I ate some yatsubashi myself. Mikoko nodded like she didn't quite get it.

"....."

Mikoko was on her knees on the floor, and as we ate, I looked her over from head to toe. It was odd. Not remarkably odd, but Mikoko really didn't seem like she belonged in here. She didn't fit in – her presence here was risky to the point of risqué. Dangerous, somehow.

I stood up.

"Mm? Where are you going? We've got forty minutes!"

"Forty minutes is only 'a little', right?"

"Augh! Ii-kun, you're being a real jerk," Mikoko said, slumping back against the wall dramatically. "You need to learn to let these things slide!"

"I'm kidding. Let's go grab a bite to eat. Nothing fun about sitting in this empty room staring at each other, is there?"

I slung my satchel over my shoulder, and headed for the door.

"It's not so bad," Mikoko muttered, but followed me.

## 2

Tomoe lived in a students-only apartment complex near Nishioji Marutamachi. The reinforced concrete exterior alone gave a clear indication how much more she was paying than me – at least five times the monthly rent, if not ten.

Mikoko had been here enough times to know her way around, and marched straight through the doors, over to the intercom, and punched in a number.

"Sup! It's Mikoko."

"Hey! Come on up," a languid voice replied, and the heavy duty glass inner doors slid open. Auto-lock security doors. Security my ass. Doors like this were no obstacle to anyone with the will to enter.

"Come on, come on, come on!" Mikoko said, already through the doors. "Sixth floor! We gotta hurry!"

"The sixth floor isn't going anywhere."

"But it isn't coming to us, either."

"Good point."

I followed after her.

"The sixth floor is the top floor. Tomo has a corner room. View's pretty nice, too."

"Hunh. A view."

My apartment had nothing of the kind. There was nothing

outside the window but trees.

The elevator arrived, and we stepped on board.

"Wonder if Akiharu's already here. Muimi will be, that's for sure..." Mikoko babbled, excitedly. Watching her unguarded emotions made me think out-of-character things like, "Friends are good to have." At least, they were for her.

We reached the sixth floor. Mikoko ran down the hall, and stopped in front of the last door. "Here! Here, over here!" she shouted, waving for me to follow. I was tempted to ask if Mikoko had ever heard of being self-conscious.

She jabbed the door bell. A moment later, the door opened, and a girl appeared.

"Hi there," she said, languidly, a cigarette clutched in her hand. Was this Tomoe? She wasn't anything like I'd imagined her. "Not like you to be on time, Mikoko."

Long, brown, curly hair, jeans and a light jacket – sort of a masculine style. She was a little taller than me, too. But her frame was so sickly (thin) you'd believe her if she said she'd be dead by tomorrow, which matched her kinda sullen expression.

"Hey, Muimi!" Mikoko said, saluting. "'Sup."

So she wasn't Tomoe. She was Muimi. Muimi had just noticed me, and gave me a long, thorough appraisal. Then she smiled. "Never actually spoken to you before, 'Ii-kun'."

"Hi," I said, non-committally.

Apparently my non-committalmentness met with approval, because Muimi cackled wildly. A valiant sort of laugh, not particularly feminine.

"You're right, he is fascinating. I bet we get along."

"Oh?" Was that really the sort of thing you could judge from a single 'Hi'? "I'm not seeing it."

"We'll agree to differ, then. That idiot Akiharu's not here yet; we called, but he's still at home."

"Yikes, he's as bad as ever. Last time he was late, he claimed it was because of the time zones. He's the worst!"

Mikoko seemed thoroughly ready to ignore her own sins. I couldn't decide whether to be disgusted or impressed. I didn't feel moved to comment, so I silently removed my shoes.

A narrow hall passed between the kitchen and bathroom. A door separated this from the main room. A common layout in this sort of apartment. Muimi opened the door for us. It was about eight or nine tatami in size, but had hardwood floors. There was a bed by the window, and a little table in the middle, with a cake, snacks, and empty glasses. Drinking was definitely the focus of this party.

Next to the table sat a girl.

This time it must be Tomoe. She was even smaller than Mikoko, and wore a dress with strawberries on it. Her hair was in pigtails, and she waved when we stepped in.

She was as gentle-looking as I'd expected. But there was a touch more quirk than I'd anticipated. She didn't seem like someone you could get a handle on at a glance; like she had unexpected depths beneath her simple exterior. Like asking what the sum of all natural numbers was.

"....no."

That was nonsense. Anyone met for the first time would give off that impression. I may have met Tomoe before, but I didn't know her well enough to have dispelled that illusion.

Looking at her, I did sort of get the feeling I'd seen her in class before. I sat down at the table across from her.

"Hey," I said.

Tomoe looked briefly puzzled, and then bowed her head politely.

"Thank you for coming," she said. Her voice was pleasing and calm, with a melodious quality to it. "I hope it wasn't too big an inconvenience. I've been hoping to get a chance to speak with you someday. I hope you enjoy yourself tonight."

Immaculate manners. I was quite touched. I had not encountered many manners recently (particularly not today.)

"Glad you're getting along already," Mikoko said, sitting

down next to me. Muimi sat next to her. I guess the seat between me and Tomoe belonged to Akiharu.

Muimi put out the cigarette between her fingers, and dropped it in the tray.

"So what now? New company here, should we get started? Can't waste time because of that idiot."

"We can't do that!" Mikoko protested. "We have to all be here. Right, Tomo?"

"Yes. I agree with Mikoko," Tomoe said. "We know he'll be here soon. Don't be so impatient, Muimi. Okay?"

"I don't really care, but..." Muimi glanced at me. "What do you say, Ii-kun?"

"I don't mind. I'm used to waiting."

That did not mean I was used to being kept waiting, but I was done complaining about that.

"You are?" Muimi said, frowning. "Okay then." She took out another cigarette, then looked at me again. "You mind?"

"I don't smoke myself, but you go ahead."

"Nah, better not," she snapped the unlit cigarette in half, and dropped it in the ash tray. "I don't smoke in front of people who don't."

So that meant both Mikoko and Tomoe did. Since she'd only asked me. I was a bit surprised to hear it.

"Oh, god, Muimi! You make it sound like I smoke, putting it that way!" Mikoko seemed quite intent on correcting this, glancing hastily back and forth at each of us. She really didn't seem to want me to know she smoked.

"You do."

"I do not! I'm only a social smoker!" Mikoko insisted, like a pouty child.

"Hunh...oh, right, okay, okay. Sorry." Muimi waved a hand languidly.

Tomoe watched all this with a happy smile.

Hmm. I think that showed the power balance between the



three of them.

Good girl, bad girl, normal girl.

I began to wonder what role Akiharu played.

He did not arrive until 6:30, a full half hour late.

"My bad, guys. I was almost on time, but the train was so crowded!"

"Don't worry about it," Tomoe said, smiling. Good girl.

"Crowded trains still run on time! And you live in the dorm, so you don't take trains to get here!" Mikoko said, taking the trouble to argue with a lame excuse. Normal girl.

"Apologies will get you nowhere. Three shots, right now," Muimi said, handing Akiharu a beer glass. Bad girl.

"Okay, okay, all in good time, Atemiya. This is a birthday, not a mayday, nobody's going down. Hey, did I just say something clever? Wait..." Akiharu finally noticed me. He grinned like a naughty child. "Heh heh. Aoi, you actually brought him."

He sat down next to me.

"Nice to meet me you, man," he said, with a nod.

I returned it.

He had brown hair in a slacker cut, and dressed like someone out of a trendy clothing magazine. Not an uncommon look for a college student, but at Rokumeikan, he was one of the few. Physically, it looked like he probably played some sort of sport, but I couldn't be sure what.

"So, uh...mind if I call you Ii-kun too?"

"Not at all."

"Cool, cool. You *are* a nice guy. Right, Aoi?" he shot her a meaningful wink.

Mikoko looked at a loss. "Uh, yeah," she said, awkwardly. It seemed like Mikoko did not actually think I was a nice guy. I'd certainly teased her a lot.

"Then let's get started," Muimi said.

It seemed like she was the group's leader, or at least the one who kept them in line.

She pointed at me. "You don't drink, right?"

I nodded.

"Oh? What's this? Don't be telling me that, Ii-kun. Us guys gotta have our booze, right?"

"Akiharu!" Muimi roared. "Don't go pulling that crap tonight! I'll cut you!"

The languid, absent-minded Muimi suddenly vanished, replaced with a girl who shot blades out of her mouth.

"You *remember* what I told you before? RIGHT?"

"....." Akiharu looked scared. Genuinely. "Uh, well..."

"Uh, well... ' my ASS!"

"Sorry."

"Sorry' ain't gonna CUT IT! What the hell are you apologizing to *me* for?"

Akiharu's mouth flapped like a dying fish, then he looked at me. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Okay," Muimi said, satisfied at last. "Sorry about him, Ii-kun. He didn't mean anything by it, so. Forgive him if you can." She smiled at me. "Can you?"

"Uh, sure, it's no big deal.

Atemiya Muimi. She had definitely been a delinquent. Those brown curls were trademark.

She could throw down, I was sure.

Mikoko poured some happoshu into glasses, and set them out in front of everyone. She poured some Oolong tea for me.

"So who's starting things off? Tomo's birthday, right?"

"Yeah," Muimi said. "Go for it, Tomoe."

Tomoe looked bashful, but raised her glass. "To my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, and to new friends."

Cheers.

I raised my glass as well.

"Friends? Friends are just...well, you know," Zerozaki shot me a cynical grin. The tattoo on the right side of his face twisted hideously. "What are friends?"

"You're actually asking that?" I said, scornfully. "I thought you just didn't have a good answer."

"Ka ha, how sweet of ya. Want to know your own opinion, ask someone else for it, right? So tell me. What are friends, to you?"

"Not that hard a question. You hang out with them, eat with them, have ordinary conversations with lots of laughter. People you can relax with. Not much more to it, is there?"

"Yeah, exactly. Exactamundo. Easy when ya put it that way. Friends are so easy. Nothing easier than hanging out, eating, talking crap, relaxin'. 'Cause you're friends. Help each other out enough you might even end up lovers. Friendship is one of life's fuckin' treasures," Zerozaki said, with an even nastier grin. "And there's the problem, right? You know. How long does that friendship last? A year? Five? Ten? Forever? Or till tomorrow?"

"You mean friendship always ends?"

"Everything ends."

"True enough. But with no end, there can be no beginning. Basic law of the universe. If you want something, you have to be willing to lose at least a third of what you have. All returns require some level of risk. If you can't bring yourself to take a risk, then you have to settle for never wanting anything."

"Ka ha ha. That's you in a nutshell."

If I'm to lose something, I never needed it.

If there's an end, then why bother beginning.

If suffering follows, then to hell with happiness.

"Why? Are you any different?"

If I could be free of sadness, then I choose to be free of joy.

If I could avoid failure, then I choose not to succeed.

I saw no point in risking anything for the sake of anything

else.

"Of course, the way the world works, whether you want it or not, reality still comes knocking."

"True dat," Zerozaki smiled.

I did not.

Be that as it may.

The party had been going on for three hours.

There is little in that time worth describing. Nobody wishes to have their drunken exploits retold to begin with, much less to strangers. No matter what the emotions at the time, the truth will always be embarrassing the morning after. Far be it from me to judge whether time spent under alcohol's thumb shows anyone's true nature, but once logic ceases to have any grip on events, then those events cease to be worth relating.

But if, in the interests of experimentation, I were to attempt a short passage, it might go something like this.

"What stone is made from nitrogen and oxygen?"

"Quartz! Tee hee hee hee!"

"Like a water-cooled machine gun firing two hundred bullets consecutively...by an assassin!"

"Shit, why is it so hot? It's only May! Global warming? The Greenhouse effect?"

"Catcher in the Rye? He doesn't catch anything!"

"Sultry tropical evenings!"

"Then I'm a tropical fish!"

For three hours.

Mikoko, Akiharu, and Tomoe were currently playing video games. Some Playstation 2 racing game. Realistic-looking four wheeled machine were slamming into each other as they tore down the track.

Not the best hospitality, but watching people have such evident fun was not an entirely bad way to spend the time.

Like I gained some residual happiness by osmosis.

But that was just the loneliness talking.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder.

"Enough of this, right?"

It was Muimi. She'd been drinking like a fish, and should be pretty drunk, but she looked exactly as she had when I came in. She didn't call herself a gang queen for nothing. Not that she'd actually called herself that.

"Wanna step outside for a bit?" she said, pointing at the door. "Time for a convenience store run."

"Should we ask if they want anything?"

"Forget 'em. They're well beyond functional communication."

This was true. I nodded, and followed her out of the room. We took the elevator down to the first floor, and left the building.

"There a store close by?"

"Yeah, a minute that way. A walk will help me sober up, too."

"You don't really seem drunk."

"I might not look it. But I'm pretty far gone. Like my brain's turned upside down. I really, really want to kick that sign over there."

"As long as you don't kick me."

"I'll try," she said, laughing. She shook her head a bit, and then looked up at the sky.

"This doesn't really feel like a birthday party, does it?" I asked. "Is this really what Tomoe wants? I mean, she's drunk and having fun now, but won't she get the blues later on?"

"Yeah...but better than getting the blues earlier. Hmm. This is fine. Any good reason to party, you know. Ah, I don't know."

"You sound tired, Muimi."

"Yeah. They wear me out sometimes."

I agreed. Mikoko was excitable to begin with, and the booze quadrupled that. Akiharu goes without speaking, but even Tomoe was pretty wound up.

"Maybe being a strong drinker isn't all that. Makes it hard to join in."

"Yeah, maybe. But as long as it's fun..."

"Should we really leave three drunks alone together?"

"Not like they're children. Better off there than...walking around at night. These days."

Right.

The Kyoto Serial Killings.

Those were still going on.

That explained why Muimi had brought me with her. I might not look like much, but I was at least male.

"I don't know. What's wrong with the world? Who cuts people apart?"

"Takes all kinds, I guess," I said, vaguely. The more we talked about this, the more likely I was to slip up. Zerozaki didn't tell me to keep it secret, but still...not the sort of story you told just anyone.

"I just don't get it," Muimi said. "I've lived twenty years. Sometimes you want to kill people. Think as much pretty often, really. You know, 'I'm gonna kill him.' 'The world would be better off without him.'"

"....."

"But this is indiscriminate. The killing itself is fun. That's what I don't get."

"They say killers like that are motivated by hate. Same reason you have for wanting to kill...whoever."

"But wouldn't that make them discriminate?"

"Nope. They hate everyone – even people they just walk past. They hate the world itself. Their hate is all-encompassing, but they can't escape it any more than they can the world. So when they kill, it only *seems* indiscriminate."

"Hunh."

Muimi nodded, but I was just guessing. I didn't know what made him kill like he did. Everything we said last night was small

talk or bullshit. We never talked about anything that mattered.

Like children. The most important thing saved till the end.

"It's all nonsense, though," I said.

Muimi looked confused.

We reached the convenience store. Muimi headed straight back to the drinks.

"More booze?"

"Nah, I've had enough. Pocari time. Got start sobering them up, or they'll never get home."

"Oh, okay."

We bought a few two-liters of Pocari Sweat, and a few bags of chips. I carried everything – should I have seen that coming?

As we left the store, Muimi dug a cigarette out, tossed it to her lips, and lit it with a nifty looking Zippo. Then she remembered, and started to put it out with her fingers.

"I really don't mind. We're outside. Have one."

"....you sure?"

"Walking and smoking isn't the best manners, but it's night. Nobody's here. Don't drop the ash, and nobody can fault you."

"Then...hmm. No, forget it. I keep my own rules."

She put it out with her fingers, then crumpled it up and put it in her pocket. Apparently she was not the littering type. Even modern college students had some moral fibre.

"If I can ask...doesn't that burn?"

"Nah. I'm used to it." An embarrassed smile flickered across her lips. "This movie I used to like? The villain was a mob boss, and he always rolled his own, and put them out on the palm of his hand. I thought it was cool, and kinda copied it."

"Hunh."

"Course, now I think it was the actor that was cool. But it's a habit now. Anyway, li-kun, if I can get serious for a moment..."

Her expression snapped to a serious one in the blink of an eye. It was a little unnerving.

"Mikoko's a little excitable for you, right?"

"I wouldn't say that..."

Muimi nodded, thoughtfully. She looked even more serious, hesitated a moment, and then said, "What do you think of her?"

"Um..."

Her expression made it clear I was not going to get away with some tossed off, jokey cop-out answer. But I didn't really see what she was actually driving at. What did I think of her?

"I think she's got streaks of crimson in her hair. She's around 155 centimeters tall, and probably weighs around 50kg. Judging from her personality, her blood type is B. She's an Aries, and animal fortune telling would make her a koala."

"Do you think I'm gonna let you get away with that sort of tossed off, jokey cop-out answer?"

Yikes, she was slipping into delinquent mode. Why did I always choose to step on land mines? I dodged her gaze.

"I dunno. She seems nice enough. Maybe she is a little excitable, and can wear me out, but she's hardly the only person like that I know, so it doesn't really bother me."

"Hunh. Evasive."

"I don't like making waves."

"Right." Muimi was silent for a moment, then shot me a look out of the corner of her eye. "You're a bastard, li-kun."

"I know."

"Do you? I don't really get you. Just take this as a warning."

She stepped forward, and turned to face me. I was forced to stop walking. We were almost back at the apartment building. They were probably still playing that racing game. Muimi pushed back her curls, and glared at me.

"I've known Mikoko since we were kids."

"....hunh."

"So if you hurt her, you'll answer to me."

"....."

I gave her a blank look. Why was she saying any of this to me? Was she mad at me for teasing Mikoko earlier? Didn't seem



like something to make such a fuss about, but Muimi definitely seemed serious. So I shrugged.

"Don't worry. I may not look it, but I'm nice to my friends."

Muimi blinked at me. Then she broke up laughing. When she was done laughing, she turned her back on me.

"I take it back," she said. "You're just dense."

I thought that was quite insulting, but I also thought it described me better than any other description I'd been given, so I failed to get angry.

When we got back to the room, they were still racing. To my surprise, Tomoe was clearly the best of the bunch. Mikoko was a full lap behind.

"Okay, kids! You're all chugging Pocari on the double!" Muimi bellowed, and threw the bottles at them. Full two-liters are quite heavy, but they were all too far gone to register the pain.

I hated noise.

I never liked bustle.

Commotion really got to me.

But,

Every now and then.

Like once a year.

Maybe it wasn't so bad.

I thought.

But I was wrong.

#### 4

It was past eleven now.

"I'm off," Muimi said, standing up. "Akiharu, walk me home."

"Hunh? Do I have to?" Akiharu grumbled. He was sprawled on the floor in the corner. "Walk yourself home. I'm not ready to move yet. You live too far away. In the opposite direction from me."

"You're a man, ain't ya? Or are you too big a wuss to walk a girl home?"

"Okay, okay." Akiharu gave up and scrambled off the floor. He looked over at Tomoe. "So, your birthday present."

He took a parcel out of his bag.

"Oh," Muimi said. "I didn't think."

"Whaaat? Am I hearing this right? Atemiya..." Akiharu's grin could accurately be described as shit-eating. "Did you seriously forget to bring a present to your friend's birthday party? I thought better of you. I really did. Tell me you're joking. How will you ever live this down?"

"Shut up, asshole. My smile's present enough," Muimi said, crossly. She headed for the door.

"Hey! Wait, don't get all mad! What are you, five? Augh, bye, Emoto! See you at school! Hang out with us again, Ii-kun!"

And with that, he ran out the door after Muimi.

"Bye!" Tomoe called out a moment too late.

When she heard the door slam, she turned her attention to the present. She untied the ribbon, and carefully removed the paper.

"What could it be? What do you think, Ii-kun?" Tomoe had sobered up quite a bit. Her cheeks were still slightly flushed, and her voice a little loud, but her personality had largely reverted to normal. "I always did love presents."

"Well...I'd wager it definitely isn't yatsushashi." The yatsushashi I'd brought had long since been eaten. "From the size, I'd guess jewelry of some kind?"

"Yeah...oh, it's a lanyard. Cool."

There was a capsule filled with some sort of liquid hanging off the lanyard. It didn't look like the sort of thing you gave a girl, but Tomoe was right; it was pretty cool.

"Heh heh. I wanted something like this," Tomoe said, happily putting it on. "What do you think, Ii-kun? How's it look?"

"Looks good," I said, not really sure what else to say.

She seemed thrilled with it. I looked over to the side of the

room, where Mikoko lay, fast asleep. She looked so happy I didn't want to wake her. She might well be planning to spend the night here.

"So, Ii-kun," Tomoe said, suddenly sitting up properly. "Let me thank you again for coming tonight."

"Nah, it's nothing worth thanking me for."

"But you don't really like this sort of thing, do you?" she asked, hesitantly, but like she was just stating the facts. She looked up, and watched my face carefully.

Like...

She could see right through me.

Into the depths of my mind.

"...well, that's not..."

"You don't like opening up to others?"

"...no, I wouldn't say that. Everyone likes a good party, right?"

"You're lying now."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are."

"Yeah, I am."

Tomoe giggled. But her eyes were not smiling. They looked downright sad. The disconnect caught me off guard.

What was going on here?

Why would she be sad after celebrating a party with all her friends?

I could see no reason.

Even...

If there was one...

"Mikoko..." she said, looking over at her sleeping friend. "Is really a good girl."

"Yeah," I said, honestly. "I'm sure she is."

"I wanted to be like Mikoko."

"Mm."

"...but that didn't happen."

"....yeah."

She hung her head.

"Now I'm twenty, and I'm still not her. I don't think I'll ever be like her. No matter how many years go by. I still won't be like her when I die."

"Nothing wrong with that. People are different."

"Tell me, Ii-kun," Tomoe said, looking me in the eye. "Have you ever felt you were a defective human being?"

"....."

"I have."

She smiled.

The saddest smile I'd ever seen.

"...everyone does," I said, without thinking. Empty words of consolation, words that even I wasn't sure I genuinely believed. I simply did not want to see that smile, and said what I did not mean to make it stop.

What a bastard.

What a clown.

It was terrifying how pathetic I was.

"Everyone feels like that sometimes. There's no such thing as a perfect human being. Everyone has their strong points and weak points."

"I know that. I do. Really. But I think you know that's not what I'm talking about. I'm speaking of something much more critical, much more fundamental, something...

...something fatal."

I gulped.

Those words...

...shook me.

I couldn't see the depths of Emoto Tomoe's heart.

And this was why.

She'd been finished.

A long time ago.

"There's another me right here," Tomoe said, pointing over her right shoulder. "Even when I'm having fun with Muimi and Akiharu and Mikoko and you, she's back there watching, sighing. Mocking me for having fun, scornfully reminding me that it won't amount to anything."

"....."

"I might never be like her until the day I die," Tomoe said. "But maybe I'll be like her after I die. In my next life, I'd like to be Mikoko. Smile like I don't have a care in the world, blow my top when I'm angry, cry like a baby when I'm sad, live my life to the fullest."

"I don't..."

This time.

I told the truth.

"I don't want to be reborn. I want to die young."

"Yeah," Tomoe said, smiling gently.

Mikoko woke up an hour later.

"Ugh," she said, shaking her head blearily.

"What now? I'm heading home – are you spending the night here?"

"No, I'll go home," she said, struggling to her feet. "I'm not drunk any more. Give me another ten seconds."

"Okay. I'll walk you home."

I wasn't that big a wuss, I murmured. Mikoko didn't get the reference. She'd been asleep when Muimi left, so why would she?

"Bye, Tomoe."

"See you again." Tomoe waved.

I picked up my satchel, and headed for the front door. I sat down next to it, and put my shoes on. The laces on these shoes were a pain; they were easy to get off, but often took a while to get back on. Mikoko was still pretty out of it. Through the door, I could hear her bumping into things. Didn't seem worth worrying about. I

stepped out into the hall, and she came out a minute later.

"Ugh," she said, clutching her head. "My head hurts. I'm dizzy. Like a murder in a convenience store but the killer's wearing roller blades."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. You sure you shouldn't stay over? No sense forcing yourself to walk home."

"No, I can make it home."

Mikoko staggered down the hall. I shrugged, and followed.

When we got outside, she turned to look at me. "You have fun?"

"Yeah. But I'm not doing that again any time soon."

"Don't talk like that! We'll do it again soon, everyone together. When's your birthday?"

"March."

Mikoko hung her head. "And mine's in April...I should have asked you faster."

"So, where do you live? I'll walk you there."

"Over by the river – Horikawa Oike. We have to go to your place first, though."

"Why?"

"My scooter..."

Oh, right, she drove to my place.

"Are you okay to drive?"

"Sure."

Didn't look like it, but if she said she could, then who was I to argue? Worst came to worst, I could always call her a cab.

"....."

We went up Nishi Oji to Nakadachiuru, turned east, and then David Bowie started playing. I thought it was a guerrilla concert at first, but it was just Mikoko's ring tone.

"Mm?" Mikoko took her phone out of her purse. "Hello, this is Mikoko! Bright as Ashinoko on a clear day! Mm? Tomo?" Guess it was Tomoe calling. "Mm, mm. Mm. He's with me. Walking right in front of me. I don't mind. Okay, I'll ask him."

She held out her phone.

"Tomo wants to talk to you."

"To me? Why?"

"I dunno."

".....?"

Did I forget something? I took Mikoko's phone. It was about half the size of my own, and felt weird.

"Hello?"

"....."

"Hello?"

"...Ii-kun."

Her voice.

So faint, like she was frightened. All voices sound different over the phone, but she clearly didn't sound the same as she had back in her room.

"Tomoe?"

"...mm."

"What's wrong? Did I forget something? I've got my satchel."

"No, that's not it. Just...something I forgot to say."

She forgot to say?

"Okay. What?"

".....never mind. Bye."

She hung up.

I was left listening to the buzz. Four times before I took the phone away from my ear. I stared at it another three seconds, then handed it back to Mikoko.

"Thanks."

"Sure," she said, taking it. "What'd Tomo want?"

"Uh...I'm not sure."

"?"

Mikoko looked confused, but so was I. What had Tomoe wanted to tell me? What had she decided not to tell me?"

"What? What's going on? Is it a secret? You and Tomoe

have secrets?"

"No, nothing like that. Mikoko," I said, changing my line of thought. "Do you have anyone right here?" I asked, pointing over Mikoko's right shoulder.

"Hunh?" She gave me a baffled stare.

Of course she did.

"Have you ever felt like someone was watching you from back there?"

"No, can't say I have. Why do you ask?"

"No reason."

"I think it would be pretty scary..." she said, then clapped her hands. "But right here?" She pointed at her chest. "I've got someone here."

"Hunh," I said. With that grin, whoever was there was probably her boyfriend.

Ten minutes later, we reached my apartment. There was only one vehicle parked near my apartment, so it must be Mikoko's.

"That's a Vespa!"

A white vintage model.

She had seriously called a Vespa a scooter. Yeah, technically not inaccurate, but a Vespa was a Vespa and you called it a Vespa. Calling it a scooter was like an insult. And not just any insult. The kind of insult that made me question my very existence. Everyone has one belief that they will stake their very life upon, that they value more than the world itself, and this was one of mine. Furious, I spun around to yell at her...

"....."

Mikoko was asleep.

"...I am amazed."

She was asleep standing up. I thought she'd been quiet, but had she been sleepwalking? It seemed likely. I was witnessing the limits of mankind's capabilities. I patted her cheek, but she did not wake up. I considered grabbing her cheek and yanking it, but would be hard pressed to make excuses if someone saw me do that, so I



stopped myself.

"But I can't exactly leave her here."

That left two methods.

Give or take.

With a grunt, I hefted her onto my back. She grumbled a bit, but did not wake up. She was pretty light – probably because she was so short. Or were all girls this light?

I carried her into the building, and up the stairs to the second floor. The wooden floors groaned beneath my feet. I reached my room, then turned around and went next door.

I knocked.

"Hold your horses."

A minute later, Miiko opened the door. She was wearing a red jinbei this time. This time the back of it said 'atrocities.'

She gave me a suspicious glare, looked at the girl on my back, and then thought for a moment.

"You're a minor, right?" she asked. "I'll cover as best I can, but you're better off turning yourself in. Japanese police are highly skilled. You don't stand much chance of getting away with it."

"For once, that's not what I need. She's a classmate of mine, and dead drunk. Can she stay the night here?"

"...hmm." Miiko put her hand on her chin, thinking. "Can't you just put her up in yours?"

"Um, well, but she is a girl. And it sounds like she has a boyfriend, so she can't really stay with me, can she?"

"Hunh. Well, I don't mind. Give and take. Know what is right and do it. But you owe me for it."

"Yeah, I'll go antique shopping with you."

"As long as you understand. What's her name?"

"Mikoko. Um. Aoi, I think."

"Aoi Mikoko. Weird name," Miiko said, and took her from me. It's good to have neighbors you can rely on.

"I'll leave her to you."

"Get a good night's sleep. I don't want to see you sleeping

past noon again."

"Hunh? I've never slept that late."

"...oh? Never mind then. Good night."

"Good night."

I bowed my head, and went to my room.

Spread out the futon, and dove in.

"Sleep."

And thus the day ended. May 14<sup>th</sup>, Sunday. But it was already past 0:00.00 so it was now Sunday the 15<sup>th</sup>. The zero o'clock twenty four hours from now would be the 16<sup>th</sup>. And the next zero o'clock would be the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Zero o'clock.

Zerzaki.

Was that human failure killing his seventh victim? Or was he on his eight already? With that thought, this defective product fell asleep.

## Chapter 3 – Murderer(s)

Emoto Tomoe

Classmate

No.

**I don't want to think any more.**

## 1

A knock woke me just past eight.

I pushed my hair out of my eyes, and got up.

When I opened the door, Mikoko was outside. Her usual cheer wasn't; she looked down right apologetic, and more than a little embarrassed.

"Did I wake you?" she asked.

"Nah. I was about to get up anyway," I said, stretching. "Morning, Mikoko."

"Same to you, Ii-kun. Sorry about yesterday. I, uh...seem to have fallen asleep."

"Don't worry about it. Make sure to thank Miiko, though."

"Yeah," she said, nodding somewhat evasively.

"She's nice, isn't she?"

"Yeah, she is. She's cool, actually. She's the one who studies sword arts?"

"Does she look like the thirteen-year-old?"

"No," Mikoko admitted. There was a long, awkward silence. Finally she asked, "Is the sword stuff why she dresses weird? Like clothes you see in festivals and stuff."

"They're called jinbei."

"Jinbei? Never heard of them," Mikoko said, looking baffled. "Like the jinbei shark?"

"Um, you know the pattern on the jinbei shark's sides? It looks like it's wearing jinbei. When people started making clothes with that pattern, they named the clothes after the shark."

"You sure know a lot," Mikoko said, sounding impressed. "I'll have to tell that to Tomo."

Tomoe was nicer than me, so would probably tell her it was actually the other way around. And that the jinbei shark was

actually the whale shark. Exactly when had I started lying all the time like this? I might have to have a serious think about it someday.

"Anyway," Mikoko said, changing the subject. "Are you and Asano...close?"

"She's saved me from starvation any number of times. But I've also saved her from being crushed to death under piles of antiques, so we're even. She gave me the yatsushashi we ate yesterday."

"Hunh," Mikoko said, not sure what to make of that. "I don't really like yatsushashi."

"You don't?"

"They're too sweet."

"Miiko's got quite a sweet tooth."

"I don't," she snapped. I wasn't sure why, or what she was driving at.

"Whatever. So, Mikoko, plans for today?"

"Uh, um. Well," she pulled a small pink package out of her purse. "This was Tomo's present, but I totally forgot to give it to her. Isn't that awful? I should have handed it over before we started drinking. I was waiting for the right moment and wound up taking it with me."

"So you're going to give it to her now? She's probably still home."

"Yeah, seems like the thing to do," Mikoko said, at last showing me her usual smile. "Anyway, thanks. We'll have to hang out again sometime soon."

"I don't know about that."

"Why do you always do that? It'll be fun, I promise!"

"I'm kidding. Sure. If I got nothing better to do, I'll come along."

I only said this to be polite. But Mikoko looked so happy I wound up feeling guilty. If I said I was kidding again, would she cry? Or get mad? I was sure she'd do one of those, so I just said,

"See you around."

Mikoko nodded happily, and turned to leave.

Then I remembered.

"Mikoko," I said. "Let me say one thing."

"Mm? What, Ii-kun?"

"Call your Vespa a Vespa. Scooter is an insult."

"Wow, I've never heard you sound so commanding! Like a prep school that allows street clothes, but everyone wears their uniforms!"

"Do you understand me? You did, right?"

"You're as scary as Muimi." She did look genuinely a little frightened. Maybe I was being a bit of dick. But if I didn't say it this forcefully, she'd never understand. "Okay, I'll be more careful," she promised, and turned to leave again.

Then.

At the landing, she turned around again.

"So I have something to say to you, too," she said.

"Mm? What?"

She took a deep breath. "My name is Aoi! Not Aoi! I told you not to forget it!"

I knew that, I thought...but come to think of it, I had told Miiko her name was Aoi Mikoko. It was extremely hard to correct Miiko on anything she'd once learned it (she still believed that Shakespeare was a flavor of shake at McDonalds like I'd told her) so she must have called her Aoi over and over. Well, maybe not that often.

Aoi and Aoi didn't seem all that different to me, but that itself was probably pretty rude. Japanese people were as proud of their family names as Italians were.

"Okay. I promise I won't forget again."

"Okay then. Oh, and," she said, quietly. "I don't have a boyfriend."

She ran away down the stairs.

".....hunh?"

My expression must have been quite a sight.

Um.

What?

Had Miiko told her I'd said that? I vaguely remembered having said something like that to her, as an excuse not to have her sleep in my room. But. But Miiko wouldn't...

"I wouldn't say something like that."

Eep. She was standing right next to me.

"Who screams in the halls of a building this old? Everyone in the building hear her. She trying to scream the building down?"

"Uh..."

"I gotta work. You teach your friend some manners."

Miiko went off down the hall. Her blue jinbei said "rage" on the back. Perhaps she and Mikoko had not really hit it off. Their names were too similar.

But she hadn't mentioned the boyfriend thing. So the name thing was also in question.

"Was Mikoko actually awake...?"

Sleeping while asleep was one thing, but walking while asleep was pretty unrealistic. It was harder to see human limits than that. So Mikoko had actually been conscious. Barely, or totally. She'd heard me get her name wrong, and knew I'd said she had a boyfriend.

Had she just not wanted to go home?

But she could have just said as much. No reason to pretend to be asleep. People sure do act weird sometimes, I thought, and went back to my room.

## 2

So.

That evening marked the point at which I grew seriously sick of this story.

Alone in my room, reading a thick book I'd borrowed from the school library, I was interrupted by a loud pounding on the door. Nobody wants their quiet time interrupted, but I was used to that

sort of thing, and did not get unreasonably angry. I opened the door, certain that underworld fifteen-year-old was here to borrow money again.

"...oh."

It was a man and woman I did not recognize.

The man was particularly striking. He was probably in his mid-thirties. It wasn't so much that he was tall as it was his legs were long. His hair was slicked back. I have no idea how he wore a black suit and tie in this heat. The fashion choice alone would have made him remarkable, but he was always wearing sunglasses. An American would have assumed one of the men in black had come to erase his memory.

The woman looked more normal. An unremarkable suit, skirt and tights. Straight black hair; fairly attractive. But her gaze was not ordinary at all. Like it shot through me, ripping me open for closer examination.

She took a step forward, and showed me her police badge.

"Sasa Sasaki, detective with the Kyoto PD Unit 1."

How she said that name without biting her tongue, I did not know.

Her parents must have been insane.

"Uh, hi," I said, bowing my head. This response seemed to surprise her. Perhaps there were other more appropriation reactions I could have chosen, but you could tell by looking at the two of them that they were cops. I found it hard to believe anyone not a cop could give off that distinct aura.

The man chuckled, and showed me his badge.

"Ikaruga Kazuhito, likewise. Mind if we come in?"

He phrased it like a question, but it wasn't really one. I was enough of a child to want to refuse demands like this, but Kazuhito was just imposing enough that I decided this would be unwise.

"Uh.....sure, come in. Not much room, though."

I let them in. They both appeared to be surprised at just how little room there was, but did a pretty good job of concealing it. If I



was their boss, I'd have given them a raise on the spot. But I wasn't, so their wages remained unchanged.

"Please, sit down."

They did. I filled two cups with tap water, and put them in front of them. Much like Mikoko the day before, they chose to completely ignore this.

"I'll get right to the point," Sasaki said. "Emoto Tomoe is dead."

"Oh," I said, filling a cup for myself, and sitting down across from them. "Is she?"

"Is she?" Sasaki's poker face cracked for the first time. "Is that all?"

"Um, I...I don't express emotions well. I am actually quite surprised, deep down. I assure you."

That wasn't the only reason.

I was...

...used to this sort of thing.

But.

But I was also surprised. Half because Tomoe had been murdered. But half because when I saw them outside, I assumed it was about Zerozaki.

So half surprise, and half relief.

Two emotions that were not often experienced at the same time.

"So if the police are involved then...I assume she did not meet with an ordinary sort of death? And Unit 1..."

Unit 1 only dealt with one type of case.

"Exactly," Sasaki said. Her expression so serious it allowed no alternatives.

"So was she...

killed by the slasher?"

Sasaki shook her head.

"No."

"Oh."

That caught me off guard. I was also kinda happy to hear it. I wasn't exactly sure why, so I dropped that line of thought.

"Then how?"

"Her body was found strangled to death in her room this morning."

She was strangled.

Strangulation.

Emoto Tomoe.

Murdered.

I felt a chill settle on my heart.

When I had I stopped counting how many people close to me had died? The first time had been when I was so young I could no longer I remember it.

"Only a month since the last...that's a new record."

Sasaki frowned, but not the adorable kind of frown I often got from Mikoko. This was a highly intelligent frown, and I had never seen a cute intelligent expression.

"What did you say?"

"Talking to myself. I do that a lot. People say it's my defining feature."

She accepted this without a smile.

At this point...

I realized...

Kazuhito was watching me intently.

"....."

Ah ha.

This was why he wore the sunglasses. Sasaki talked to me, while Kazuhito watched my reactions. What beautiful nonsense. *He* would have called it a masterpiece.

I was a suspect.

"Well, yeah. I was with her last night."

"What did you say?"

"Just ordinary nonsense." I adjusted my posture. This wasn't

worth stressing out about, but I should at least give it my full attention. "You said she was murder. Who by?"

"That is under investigation. That is part of what brings us here."

Seemed a little obvious at this point, but I didn't point that out.

"You were in Emoto's room from six in the evening until midnight last night. Correct?"

"Correct."

"Can you verify the names of those present?"

"Um," Come on, memory. "Emoto Tomoe, Atemiya Muimi, Aoi...no, Aoi Mikoko, Usami Akiharu, and myself."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"Is it true you arrived with Aoi?"

"Yes. She came to my place – here – and then we went to Emoto's apartment together. At six."

"Exactly six? Earlier? Or later?"

".....earlier."

Saski was firing this questions awfully quick. Far faster than the maximum revolutions my memory could handle. I felt dizzy.

"And at the time..."

"Hold on a second," I said, cutting her off. "So many questions...give me a second to calm down. Like I said, I'm a little rattled."

"Of course. Apologies," she said, not looking at all apologetic.

She questioned me for the better part of an hour, and I told her everything that had happened the night before. Everything we'd talked about during the party. The mood. Going to the store with Muimi. Coming back. Akiharu and Muimi leaving at eleven. The present he'd given her then. The lanyard. Talking to Tomoe afterward. Taking Mikoko with me when I left. Tomoe calling at Nishi Oji Nakadatchiuri. Discovering Mikoko appeared to be

asleep (regardless of whether she actually was) when I arrived home. Sleep. Talking to Mikoko in the morning. And reading the rest of the day.

It was difficult enough keeping up with Sasaki's questions, and having Kazuhito's sunglasses staring at me the whole time only increased the pressure. We were sitting down, but I still felt exhausted by the end. And when it finished, the last thing she said?

"That's pretty much the information we had."

She was *amazing*.

With no more questions, she appeared to be lost in thought. But this struck me as a performance. If Mikoko was all surface, this woman was all depths, and as a result her depths appeared on the surface.

This was not going to be easy.

"So, the phone call..." Sasaki said, resting her index finger on her temples. "Emoto really said nothing? According to Aoi, Emoto asked to speak to you, which generally implies she had something to say."

"Right. She started to say something, but ultimately didn't. She said never mind, and hung up."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure it was Emoto?"

"It was definitely her. If I know a person, I never mistake their voice."

Sasaki glanced back at Kazuhito. They looked ready to go, but I wasn't going to let them go just yet.

"Um, Sasaki. If I can ask a question?"

".....hunh?"

Her poker face crumbled again. As it would; an unfamiliar younger male suddenly addressing someone by her given name was certainly surprising.

"It's something I have to know."

"Um," she glanced at Kazuhito again, and he gave the

slightest of nods. Permission granted. "Okay," she said.

I knew this was not because she felt sympathetic for someone whose classmate had just been murdered, but because allowing me to ask a question would give them greater insight into who I was, but I didn't care.

"Was...the body found by Aoi?"

"It was," Sasaki said, and showed no signs of volunteering further explanation. The minimum answer for any question I chose to ask. Depending on the question, she might not even do that.

But that was the answer I'd expected. The present she'd forgotten to give. She'd gone to hand it over...but no answer to doorbell or phone. An autolock security door that could easily be bypassed by following a resident in. Those doors didn't deserve to have the word lock in the name.

Hunh.

Mikoko.

How must she have felt?

As emotional as she was.

"I should have gone with her..."

But it would have made no sense at the time.

And I had no idea if I could have done anything if I'd been there. I wasn't the type. I'd just have made things worse for her.

"Is that your only question?"

"No, not quite. Um, what time was Emoto killed?"

"The time of death is between eleven on the 14<sup>th</sup> and three on the 15<sup>th</sup>."

"Which means..." since Mikoko and I had left at midnight, the crime must have happened during the three hours after that.

"And she was strangled? No knives or anything?"

"As I said."

She frowned at the word knife. I couldn't very well tell her that was because I knew a psycho killer who used knives.

"With a rope?"

"A thin fabric. Pressure on the blood vessels would have

killed her quickly. I doubt she suffered much."

This was the first time Sasaki had treated me like a human being. But whether Tomoe had suffered was of little consequence to me. She was dead either way.

I knew what death was.

People did not fear death.

People feared nothingness.

Suffering merely accompanied it.

Despair was merely a decorative touch.

"Have you already visited the others?"

"The others?" she asked, even though she knew the answer.

"The other guests at Emoto's house yesterday. Usami, Atemiya, and Aoi."

I did not really expect Sasaki to answer this, but she did, without hesitation.

"Yes. We've taken statements from all of them. Your address took some time to locate, which is why it took this long."

"What were they doing when Emoto was killed?"

This was a step further.

I took it with caution.

Sasaki's lips twisted slightly, into what might be a faint smile.

"Usami and Atemiya were in a karaoke booth near Shijo Kawaramachi all night. Aoi...I don't need to explain, do I?"

Right. Mikoko was next door, and Miiko was looking after her. That was a relief. That meant the three biggest suspects all had alibis. Akiharu and Muimi were friends, so their alibis may not be all that trustworthy, but in the absence of contradictory evidence, they were unlikely to be the focus of suspicion.

Once again...

Kazuhito's eyes bored into me.

"...tch."

Sloppy.

I looked away, avoiding both sets of eyes.

Damn it. This was not the time for relief. Relief just gave them an opening. It was careless of me. You could never let you guard down in front of any cops, much less these two.

Shit. What had they picked up on?

"Do you," Sasaki asked, her tone unchanged. "Have any more questions?"

"Um, well...one more."

If I had made a mistake, then this was definitely a mistake.

Kazuhito's stare was nothing compared with this.

But that nothing rattled me...

And I asked a question...

I should never have asked.

"Who killed her?"

A question...

I had already asked.

I asked it again.

"That is under investigation."

Sasaki's eyes were those of a hunter that has just caught her prey. She stood up.

"Thank you for your time. I imagine we'll have more questions for you." She tossed her card on the floor. "If you remember anything else, let us know."

I picked it up. It had her number at the station, as well as her cell phone number.

"Take care of yourself, kid," Kazuhito said, grinning. He turned to leave.

Oh. So he'd been faking it. A big mistake on my part, enough that I should reconsider calling myself a bystander. I had misread their roles completely.

Kazuhito's job was to make me nervous.

Sasaki dealt with me.

And deliberately let her guard slip, baiting me into making a

move.

A bold approach. But effective.

"Oh, right," she said, as if just remembering. "About your alibi. Your neighbor Asano has provided one. She says you can hear every footstep taken in the halls here."

She gave me a dignified smile.

This was a near total loss.

Even worse than that.

She'd shown mercy at the end.

God damn it.

It had been a while since I'd dealt with them, but that was no excuse. I'd completely underestimated Japanese police. Talk about being full of myself. Who had I thought I was?

I had not been so defeated since I met the red consultant.

I bit my lip.

"Kazuhito," I said, just before he stepped out the door.

He turned around.

"You'd look like Matsuda Yuusaku if you were cool."

"...if I wasn't cool, I wouldn't look like him."

Snappy comeback. Even my last ditch scramble came up empty. The two detectives left. I put the cups away, and flopped down on the floor.

I felt utterly defeated.

I'd last felt like this a month before, and the last time it had been this bad was a year ago. But feeling defeated wasn't that big a deal when I considered that a life had been turned to nothing.

".....Tomoe," I muttered.

All I had to remember was our conversation yesterday.

"Have you ever felt you were a defective human being?"

That...was not something you should say, Tomoe.

Not to someone like me.

You could live a normal life, never knowing.

If you never noticed, you would delude yourself into acceptable levels of happiness.



We were like planes with no engine or wings. Voiceless crows unable to glide.

Asking the question ended us.

Ignorance was better than denial.

"Asking questions like that...gets you killed," I said, with the voice of experience; of no help to anyone, and of no comfort at all. "People like us, once we get like that...or even if we don't..."

But I'd been only too aware of it far too long ago for anything to change, and Tomoe had been aware of it for just as long.

I closed my eyes.

I opened them again.

"Okay. Done thinking."

I vaulted upwards.

Now.

What should I do? There wasn't much I should do, but a lot I wanted to do. Not a situation I often found myself in.

I took out my cell phone, flipped through the recent calls, and started to dial Mikoko, but I canceled it before the call went through.

"Who am I kidding?"

That would be the ultimate nonsense.

What could I ever say to her? It would be irresponsible of me to even try.

I'd have to do that later.

I had no words for Mikoko now.

"In which case..."

Then I'd better start with what I *should* do.

I punched a new number into the phone. The only phone number I knew by heart. I'd not spoken to her in a while, I realized, as I waited for an answer.

"Yo! Ii-chan! You still love me today?"

Her cheer was twenty stories higher than Mikoko's, but her plug had come loose long ago, and there was nothing to limit the

flow. If I didn't stop her, she'd fly higher than the Tower of Babel.

"Wow, wow, wow, wow, wow, this is exciting, you *never* call! This is a moment for the record books! A national treasure! Legacy defined! I'd take a photo to mark to occasion but it would mean nothing without sound! So I'll have to record this call for posterity."

"Don't do that," I said, as calmly as I could.

Muimi had asked if I had trouble keeping up with Mikoko, but like I'd said, I'd spent enough time with Kunagisa that Mikoko presented no problem at all.

If Mikoko was a sunflower in full bloom...

Then Kunagisa Tomo was a mirage water lily struck by lightning.

"Tomo, you been bored lately?"

"I have not! Kinda busy! Crazy busy! My ability to process information might spring a leak soon! Emergency memory overload! I have to defrag! I'm about to blue screen! Oh no! It's coming! Got to switch to present tense! Wait for me to reboot."

"The Kyoto Serial Killings?"

"Bingo! How'd you know? You're like Maki! Or the red consultant! Kya ha ha ha ha ha ha! Return of the Psychic! And forever! Humanity's Strongest! This is the end!"

"Okay, Tomo, you're gonna have to dial it down a little."

"Mm? Why? Okay. So the Kyoto Serial Killings! It's not really going as planned on my end. This is some hard stuff! Can't seem to crack it. The killer must be Dread Jones reborn! Bwa ha ha!"

"Let's trade, Kunagisa Tomo," I said. "I'll give you information on the Kyoto Serial Killings. You give me information on another murder case."

"Mmm...?"

Kunagisa thought about that.

She did not ask how I had information about the Kyoto Serial Killings, nor why I wanted to know about another murder

case.

I trusted her...

And she believed in me.

No unnecessary explanations...

No additional exposition.

No wasted dialogue.

No redundant questions.

Kunagisa's finest quality was how she never wasted a word.

"Mm, I don't like the word trade, Ii-chan."

"Then a business transaction."

"Worse."

"Swap?"

"Warmer."

"A deal?"

"Not wrong, but..."

"Then we help each other out?"

"Okay," she said, happily. "In that case, sure."

Give? Or take?

At this point, I had not yet decided which.

### 3

When I was done talking to Kunagisa, I went next door to talk to Miiko. I knocked, and she opened the door. As always, she wore a jinbei. If you were going to wear traditional clothing, I'd prefer to see beautiful kimono, personally. She'd look good in them, I was sure.

"What?"

"Wanted to thank you. They said you provided an alibi? Thanks."

"I just told the truth. Nothing more."

"Yeah, but I've got you mixed up in this mess."

"Like always. But you do live a life of trouble, don't you?" she said, shaking her head. Not out of worry so much as bemusement. "Never a dull moment. What about the girl? The

police made it sound like she was involved."

"Yeah, sounds like."

She nodded.

"So? How were you planning on thanking me?"

"I'll buy you tea."

I didn't mean take her to a cafe – I meant tea in the Kyoto sense, a very specific use of the word that only applied to Miiko.

"Does it come with dango?"

"Some cold shiruko."

"Where?"

"Gion. Oharameya."

Miiko's eyes gleamed.

"Wait. I'll get ready."

She shut her door. She took these things seriously, and wore normal clothes when we went out together. Not something many people I knew did.

One minute later, she emerged. She handed me the keys to her car. I spun them around my finger, and snapped my hand shut around them.

#### 4

Eight that evening.

Tea with Miiko was done, and I was walking down Kawaramachi, between Shijo and Oike. Miiko had already gone home in her Fiat.

"Don't use me to kill time. Or for free rides," she said.

She'd seen right through it. She had good instincts for that sort of thing. But she came with me anyway, which was nice of her. Or perhaps she just couldn't resist sweets.

I entered a karaoke shop.

"Welcome," said the clerk. "One?"

"Um, I think someone's waiting for me."

"What name?"

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki."

"Zerozaki," the clerk said, as if it were a perfectly common

name. She tapped her keyboard a moment. "That would be room 24," she said, with a professional smile.

I thanked her, and stepped into the elevator. Room 24 was on the second floor. I got off the elevator and went down the hall, looking for the right number.

"Da da da da da da da! Da da da da da da da! Da da da da da da da da da da da da da da da da da! Da da da! Da da da da da da da! Da da da da da da da! Da da da da da da da da da da da da da da da da da! Da da da! Da! Ah! Ahhhhah!"

I heard the most amazing song I'd ever heard, and sure enough, it was coming from room 24. I shook my head, knocked, and opened the door.

"Oh?" Zerozaki said, breaking off his passionate performance. "Yo, defective product." He raised a couple of fingers in greeting.

I stepped into the room, and sat down on the couch.

"Hey, human failure," I replied.

Zerozaki put the mic down, and pressed a button on the remote to kill the music.

"You can keep singing if you want. That's what you paid for."

"Nah, I don't like singing. Imitating people. Just killing time," he said, sitting down across from me. He sighed. "It's been a day, but it doesn't feel like it, does it?"

"No," I agreed.

Even as I agreed, I was a little taken aback. I had not believed Zerozaki was in here until a minute ago. Certainly the day before yesterday...or yesterday morning, we'd agreed to meet here today, but I had not expected him to show, and he had not expected me to come. Which is exactly why I'd come, and almost certainly why he had, too.

This was another contradiction brought about...

...by the meaning of 'being used to waiting.'

Like we had the night we met, Zerozaki and I began talking

about nothing important. Ridiculous philosophy, boring observations, pointless worldviews. There were the odd tangents about music (how songs got on the hit charts) or literature (how to provoke an emotion in readers) but these were of equally little consequence. It was like we were going down a checklist.

After about four hours, I shifted gears.

"Zerozaki," I said. "What's it feel like to kill someone?"

The question seemed to provoke no strong feelings in him.

"What's it feel like? I don't feel anything."

"Nothing? It doesn't feel good, or satisfying, or anything like that?"

"If it did, I'd be some sort of pervert," Zerozaki scoffed. He was one to talk, I thought, but I waited for him to continue. "Look, I'm, well...a killer. But it's not like I get off on it. The distinction's hard to see, I suppose, and I can't explain it all that well. But that sort of thing's usually explained by someone else, you know. I just follow along. My head never was great at thinking."

"Okay, then let me change the question. What is killing to you?"

"Nothing."

There were two meanings to that word.

No value.

And no worth.

"Now let me ask a question, defective. What is death to you?"

"Not a question I can answer easily. If I have to answer, I'd say...like a battery with no juice left."

"Batteries? Like double As?"

"Basically. They're life, and you're like the insulator."

"Should I be insulted?"

He laughed.

A happy laugh.

When I laughed, did it look like this?

"Okay," I said. "Let me try putting it another way. Do you

understand how people feel when they kill?"

"Mm? That's a tough one. Typically you. Do I understand? No."

"You don't?"

"No. First of all, I don't understand how other people feel to begin with. Whether they've murdered someone or not. Whether they're a killer or not. Next, I don't understand how I feel. I don't know where the chaos swirling inside me comes from. Which is why I can only say I don't know how people feel when they kill."

"Well, that's consistent, at any rate."

"Let me add that I don't have any intention of killing anyone," he added. Tossed that out there at the end.

"What do you mean?"

"Asking me that turns it into a more conceptual discussion, but, um. Well, for example," he picked up the phone on the booth wall. "Hey, can we get two bowls of ramen? Thanks."

A minute later, a clerk bought us some ramen.

"Eat, it's on me," Zerozaki said, and grabbed some noodles with his chopsticks. "This is food."

"You hardly need to point that out."

"The three basic human desires are food, sleep, and sex. So, why do I eat?"

"You need nutrition."

"Yeah, humans die without it. So eating is a pleasurable experience. Sleeping's enjoyable too, and obviously, sex is too. These actions are required to live, and to leave new lives behind, so they go hand-in-hand with pleasure."

"That logic is easy to follow. Therefore..."

"Don't be in such a hurry. Therefore? Therefore? Are you Akutagawa Ryunosuke?"

"Hunh? Don't you mean Dazai?"

"Akutagawa. Dazai was only copying Akutagawa when he used the word."

Which of us was the college student here? I decided to wait

for him to finish. He paused to think for a moment before continuing.

"All right, so imagine a human obsessed with the idea of eating. The stimulus provided by flavor, the joy of it entering your mouth, the pleasure of chewing, the thrill of swallowing, the satisfaction of digestion, all the pleasure your mind provides. The nutrition of it plays no factor; he is fixated purely on the process of eating itself. A real fatso," he chuckled. "To this guy, the concept of nutrition is a joke. The method and the goal have switched places, and the supposed goal has become a side effect. So here's the problem. Can we really say he's eating? Don't even bother thinking. The answer is no. He is eating the concept of eating."

"So you're killing the concept of killing? That seems like a bit of a reach," I said. "Treating the desire to eat and the desire to kill as equivalents is immoral, and your goal was always killing – where does the switch take place?"

"Well, this is where it gets difficult. Or maybe just subtle. Like I said, my goal isn't killing, nor cutting them apart afterwards."

"Then what? You make no sense."

"I'm no worse than you, but I am pretty bad. So yeah. At first I thought I was after the thrill."

"The thrill."

"Yeah, the bigger the risk, the bigger the fun, right? Nothing ventured, nothing gained. But murder is a huge risk for almost no return. Not worth it. Stupid. So most murders are the result of uncontrolled emotions. Spur of the moment. Didn't mean to kill him, but before I knew it...heard that before, right?"

He took a vicious looking knife out of his vest pocket.

"This is a dagger. You grip it with your hand like this. First person I killed? Stabbed this into his right jugular, slid it sideways. No justification for it. I wasn't trying to hurt him, or make him suffer – in fact, as methods of killing go, it's on the nice side. I'm not bragging about my exploits here. You probably know that



bragging is one of the worst thing a human can do, particularly bragging about bad shit. That's just unforgivable. All kidding aside, this is the only way I can kill. Same as I tried to do with you, across the mirror."

"Really?"

"Really. If we were to fight again, obviously, logically there's a chance you could kill me. But while you were killing me once, I'd have killed you 9999 times without even giving you time to feel it. 'Course, realistically, we only have one life, so it's a bit of a black swan metaphor. Anyway, I can only kill people to kill them. The eight people I've killed here? They weren't killed emotionally. That much I can say for sure."

Eight. Two more in the last two days. While I'd been leading my life, Zerozaki had been leading his. Obviously.

"Does that make me an idiot?" he said. "Maybe. I gain nothing from killing them. Well, maybe a little; I do take their money."

One of the more bizarre features of the Kyoto Serial Killings was that the victims' valuables were taken. This was unusual in cases like this, but there was a simple reason for it; Zerozaki was homeless, and needed money.

That money was paying the hourly rate on this room. Even this ramen was funded by sin. I took another bite.

"But for that I can just get a job. It isn't a reason to kill. It's way easier to work all day than to kill a single person. But I chose to kill. Hence my theory."

"I see. So, as far as Zerozaki Hitoshiki is concerned, the risk itself is the reward."

"Right. The goal and the means have switched places, or merged into one. The action itself is my goal. My goal is the action. Achieving that goal ends the action. Not a bad theory."

"But how is that different from losing sight of your goal? Say there was a guy that liked reading. You go to his room, and it's covered in books. And he's still buying more. It's his choice to buy

them, but he's already got more books in his room than he has time to read in his life. But still he buys."

"Hunh. Ah, mm, mm, yeah, I gotcha, I gotcha. You're talking about the limits of processing capabilities. Once that gets crossed, the goal and the means fuse. Ishikawa Gozaemon. 'A magnificent view! A magnificent view! For this view of spring, a million dollars would be too low a price, too low a price!' You may be right," Zerozaki leaned back on the sofa, nodding. "But even if you're right, it doesn't change a thing. As reasons go, the theory I suggested is totally wrong. The idiotic equation where risk equals return doesn't work at all. It's just logical play."

"So then what?"

"From this point we get to more common ideas," he said, leaning forward. "Back to when I was a kid. You were a kid once yourself, right? So was I. So what kind of kid was I? Not a particularly unusual one. I believed in God. Someone hit me, it hurt. Even hurt to see other kids get hit. I was normal that way. I wanted to make people around me happy. I was grateful when I should be. I even fell in love a few times. Like anyone else. But if I was just sitting – not reading, not watching TV, just sitting, leaning on my elbow, watching the sky, whatever – I'd find myself wondering how to kill people. It kinda scared me the first time, honestly. There I was, figuring out ways to kill people like it was the most normal thing in the world. I was scared that *was* me."

"So you were aware of this? But how is this 'common'? I think we're getting pretty far from anything like that – you were born a killer?"

"Don't jump to conclusions. I certainly wondered if that might be true, but it wasn't. I wondered if I was born wanting to kill and driven to hurt, but I wasn't. That wasn't it at all. This is the common part, the part you hear people say all the time – I was on the beaten path."

"On the beaten path? What does that mean?"

"It's a metaphor, and a common one. A life following a

script. Junior high, high school, college, get a job, get a wife, get promoted – the same pattern everyone follows. But I was following the path beaten by murderers."

"I think that's a life on the path less taken."

"Like you're one to talk. Fine, sure. I'm not limiting paths to the ones society creates for us. There are paths you create yourself too. Like kids who want to be like Ichiro and dedicate themselves to baseball. They're setting their lives on a path, too."

"Okay, I can see that. But if you go that far, than everyone's on a path, as long as you don't drop out."

As long as you didn't receive a fatal blow.

Lose sight of the path, go tumbling down the ravine.

"I don't know who created the path I was on. Might have been me, might have been someone else. But either way, I was following it too closely. Following it without ever receiving a fatal blow, unable to stop. No way to even conceive of hitting the brakes."

"Now it's coming together."

In other words...

He was still in the middle.

And...

When he began following the path, and now that he was in the middle of doing so...

...he was not the same person.

"Right. The past will never let you go. But that grip is weak, like being strangled with a tuft of pure cotton. You can say that the paths other people follow are boring, but if you get sick of the rail you made yourself, it's the same thing. But you can't stop now. You've got obligations."

"And it's worse because you can't blame it on anyone else."

"Yep. Especially if you're on a path as fucked as mine."

"So give up. You may have to follow your path, but that's no reason to follow the rules."

"True that. You've never been one for rules, either, right?"

"I'm a legitimate college student. Not like you."

"And you don't feel stupid saying that? Like looking at a mirror and asking, 'Who are you?'"

This was true. I nodded.

"Anyway," he went on. "In that sense, I don't *know* that I'm killing people. Killing people isn't my goal at all. You could say that I kill people the same way I breathe, but the truth is, if I don't kill people, I feel like I'm suffocating. It's the price I pay to keep following the path I've been on all this time. Like I took out a loan at the beginning, and I'm still paying it off. Hence the idea of killing the act of killing."

"It's all too conceptual to follow...can you put it in more concrete terms?"

"Not really. We're talking conceptually. In concrete terms, I killed and cut apart eight people. The end."

"Right."

I stared up at the ceiling for a bit. Zerozaki's story was certainly interesting, and there were new discoveries in there, but it wasn't ultimately much help.

"Nngh, I would have thought a killer was most likely to know how it feels to kill..."

But come to think of it, of course not. The way Zerozaki killed was nothing like the way Tomoe had been killed. I knew Sasaki hadn't told me everything, but Tomoe probably had been strangled with a thin cord. While Zerozaki's crimes were all cutting people open with knives. Only the death part was the same; everything else was unrelated.

Zerozaki killed indiscriminately.

Tomoe had been killed by someone who wanted her dead.

A grudge of some kind.

Emotions rotting away in the seams of human relations.

"So why do you ask?"

"Well, you see...a classmate of mine was murdered."

"Murdered? Someone from your college?"

"Yeah. I thought you did it at first, but apparently not. She was strangled."

"Oh. Not my style," Zerozaki said, screwing up his face.

"I know. But I was hoping a killer would know a killer."

"That's your first mistake. A mistake you probably make a lot. People aren't killed by demons. They're killed by other people. People can't understand demon's emotions, and demons can't understand human emotions. Like the platypus and the archaeopteryx."

I wasn't sure which was which, but Zerozaki was right. A psycho killer like him was abnormal and twisted, and seen as such because they were so rare.

"So, what? What kinda case is it?" he asked, not sounding particularly interested.

I didn't see any reason to keep it from him, so I told him what little information Sasaki had given me. Told him about Mikoko, Tomoe, Muimi, Akiharu, and the birthday party. He listened carefully, shook his head every now and then, looked lost in thought for a bit, and then sighed.

"Okay, okay, I see. So?"

"So...what?"

"So means so."

He glared at me. I still had no answer. We sat in silence for an hour.

"Okay," Zerozaki suddenly said, sitting up. "Let's go."

"Go where?"

"Emoto's room."

Like he was going to hang out with a friend he didn't like that much. I got up feeling like I knew this would happen, and followed him out of the room.

Leaving the half-eaten ramen on the table.

## 5

"So this Aoi," Zerozaki said, absently, as we were walking west on Shijo. "If you ask me, she's definitely in love with you."

"Hunh?"

That idea came from so far out in the blue that I just gaped at him.

The time was past midnight, making it Monday, the 16<sup>th</sup>. Even on a major east-west pipeline like Shijo there were few cars. Occasional groups of college students (on their way home from parties) aside, there were few people walking around.

I had school tomorrow. From first period, a language class (which meant attendance was mandatory.) That meant I was pretty much doomed to being up all night.

"What were we talking about?"

"About Aoi," Zerozaki said, irritated. "From what you've told me, I can only assume the girl's in love with you."

"No way. What is wrong with your ears that would lead you to an idea that stupid? Not like you. I mean, Mikoko has a boyfriend."

"She said she doesn't."

"Oh, right." Now that he mentioned it, maybe she did say something like that. I wasn't too sure. "I just don't see it. She seems to like me well enough, but the way you like a cute animal. And not a puppy or anything, but an iguana or some other reptile."

"An iguana!? Then I must be a chameleon," Zerozaki chuckled. Then he looked serious again. "Okay, look," he said. "Aoi knew your address. That didn't strike you as weird? Why would you look that up if you didn't have a thing for someone?"

"Look what up? It's on the contact list."

"Riiight, but like you said, you were traveling the first week of school, and missed those classes. You were a week behind everyone else. You weren't there when they made the contact list. Your name and address aren't on that."

"....oh."

That was a blind spot. I had no memories of giving anyone at school my address, and any address that made it onto a contact sheet wouldn't be the antique apartment building I lived in. Nobody

at Rokumeikan should know where I actually lived.

"But Mikoko said that's where she got it. Weird. Maybe she was wrong? But that makes no sense, so she must have lied."

"Or she needed an excuse. She probably just followed you home. That's how she knew."

"I'd have noticed someone following."

"Maybe. So let's just say she found out your address somehow – probably in a highly questionable manner. So she can't tell you the real reason she knows, so she made up the bit about the contact list."

"Hunh."

"So tell me this. Who – particularly a girl – would want to know the address of a complete stranger?"

His smile was not pleasant.

"Hmph," I said. "You sure are sure of yourself."

"Born sure of myself. Just the way I am."

"But I'm just not seeing it. I'm sure you're wrong."

"And what do you base that on?"

"Mikoko kinda hates me."

"Hunh?" Zerozaki, as if I'd just lost my mind. "Do you not even remember what you say? You just told me that Aoi likes you! Now you're saying the complete opposite?"

"Not a contradiction. I just don't view the world two dimensionally. It doesn't work in Boolean terms. I need to explain that? Right. Um. For example. Imagine a car driving down this street. It's traveling 50km/h."

"Ah ha, so is it traveling fast or slow?"

"Yeah. What do you think?"

"Slow. You can drive faster than that this late."

"So imagine he floors it. I don't know how fast the average car can go these days, so let's just say full throttle, the car goes 200km/h. Is that fast?"

"Fast. Definitely."

"And finally, imagine the driver's not even touching the gas."

What then?"

Zerozaki shrugged. "He's not moving. Neither slow nor fast."

"But if you had to choose?"

"Slow. Can't say someone's going fast if they aren't moving."

"Right. So let's go back to the first question. Is 50km/h fast or slow? I would answer it as follows: it's fifty kilometers fast, but a hundred and fifty slow."

Zerozaki nodded, taking it in. The tattooed side of his face slowly twisted into a smile.

"Okay. Then how does this apply to Aoi?"

"She likes me at 70 and hates me at 50."

"But that doesn't equate to likes you at 20."

Exactly. Human emotions didn't work like simple arithmetic. The numbers in the formula change constantly, switching around, growing, shrinking, ever flowing. Those observing them can only hope to estimate a rough average.

"So what about you?"

"Hunh?"

"You. How much do you like Aoi, and how much do you hate her?"

"Like at zero and hate at zero."

"Yeeesh," Zerozaki said, backing away from me. "That's awful! You're a real piece of work."

"And you're a psycho killer."

"Shut up, bystander."

Like at zero, hate at zero.

No connection formed at all.

Of course, there was a certain amount of exaggeration included in those figures, but that didn't mean they weren't true.

My heart is made of ice.

Cold enough to kill people for living.

As Zerozaki said, this was awful.



But in functional terms, not conceptual ones...

I was not capable of forming strong emotions where strangers were concerned.

"Well..." "...well."

"It's a masterpiece," Zerozaki laughed.

"Nonsense," I said, not laughing.

"So tell me, all academics aside, is there anyone you do like?"

"Hmm. I'm not sure."

"Even though it's your emotions?"

"Especially because it's my emotions."

"Oh, right. You're a bystander. You understand others better than you understand yourself. You can't observe yourself, after all. So, what? Have you or not? Is that unquantifiable? Quantum physics? Doppelganger's cat?"

"That wasn't Doppelganger."

"Oh.....then who was it? It's math, so it has to be a German..."

Zerozaki clearly had some alarming stereotypes. He spent several minutes trying to remember, but he never figured out whose cat it was, and wound up swearing and slapping his own cheek. That seemed to help him move on.

"Okay," he said. "So, in conclusion, you're an asshole."

"That's probably true, except..."

Except.

What did I plan to follow that up with? Did I consider saying someone's name? Of course I did. But whose name that was, I do not know.

"It's all nonsense, in the end."

".....so is that what you say to run away?"

Zerozaki made a show of letting his entire body droop. That answer after such a long silence, I can see why. Zerozaki wasn't as over-the-top as Mikoko, but he was certainly capable of dramatic reactions in his own right.

"Not that I don't do the same thing..."

We reached the intersection at Nishi Oji Shijo. To the south I could see Hankyu Saiin Station. The trains had stopped by now, so the area was deserted. We turned north. If we followed this road to Marutamachi, we'd arrive at Tomoe's apartment building.

"Maybe we should have taken a cab. We're only halfway there."

"Waste of money. Of which I have none. Unless you were planning on paying?"

"No students in Kyoto take cabs."

"Hunh. Not being a student, I wouldn't know."

At this point a thought struck me. Remembering Sasaki's piercing gaze, I asked the psycho killer a question.

"The police have an ID on you?"

"Don't think so. They've never spoken to me, and I've never been followed. I do the following, anyway."

Given his appearance (maybe face tattoos were all the rage in Tokyo, but nobody else had one here) I was surprised he hadn't been caught, but perhaps appearances had little to do with this kind of thing.

"So here we are going to Emoto's place."

"What of it?"

"Tell the truth now – you've already guessed who the killer is, right? You have a suspect in mind. A theory."

"A guess," I echoed.

I wasn't sure it amounted to that.

"Hate to break it to you, but honestly, I'm still pretty clueless. I'm not a detective or anything, not like in books or TV shows."

A detective.

The red consultant.

"I'm nothing like that."

"Of course not," Zerozaki said. "But I also don't think the case is all that hard. She was strangled to death. In her own room."

We have a time of death. The suspects all have alibis. All we need is a little more data, or..."

And Kunagisa was getting that data for me, while I was on my way to get more.

"Any chance of this being a robbery gone wrong?" Zerozaki suggested.

"I'm sure there is, but the police didn't seem to following that angle."

Sasaki and Kazuhito were both really intense people. You didn't show up that intense if you thought it was just a robbery. At least, that was my hunch.

"Hunh," Zerozaki said, thinking. "But I'm not sure there's any real need for you to investigate. Or what, there some practical necessity I'm not seeing?"

"Not really. Feel free not to come. You can go kill someone else like you usually do."

"Nah, I'm not in the mood tonight," he said. I'd been joking, he was not. "And I'm the one who suggested it."

Shortly after, we finally reached Tomoe's apartment building. The police were already gone, and there was nobody around. We stepped in through the front doors.

Okay.

"Right, there's an autolock security door."

"What now?"

"Like this," I stepped forward and dialed a number at random.

"Yes?"

"Uh, I'm from room 302? I left my key in my room. Would you mind letting me in?"

"Oh, sure thing."

The doors slid open. "Thanks," I said, and followed Zerozaki inside.

"You sure can lie," he said.

"Born that way."

We took the elevator to the sixth floor. As we walked down the hall, I took a pair of thin white gloves out of my pocket and put them on.

".....pardon me for askin'," Zerozaki said. "But if you had those gloves with you..."

"Yeah, I was planning to come here."

Zerozaki chuckled, and pulled a pair out himself, switching them with the fingerless gloves. I assumed he always had them with him.

We reached Tomoe's room. I tried the door, but it was locked.

"So how we get past this?"

"I don't know. Didn't think that far."

"Riiiiight," he said, and pulled a thin knife out of his vest. So thin it was almost more drill than knife. He jammed it in the door, and wiggled it back and forth a little until there was a click. He flipped the knife over in his hand, and slotted it back in his vest.

And opened the door.

"It was open," he said.

"How careless of them."

"Seriously. You never know when a psycho killer might happen along."

We both shook our heads, and went inside.

Down the short hallway between the kitchen and the bath, and through the interior door. It looked almost exactly like it had when I'd been here on Saturday. A few things had been moved around, but that just showed the police had done their work.

And.

In the center of the room.

A human figure, outlined in white tape.

"Wow," Zerozaki said. "They really do that. I thought that was just on TV. Hunh, Emoto's about the same height as me."

"Yeah."

Tomoe was on the small side for a girl, but Zerozaki was

ridiculously small for a man. They might not be exactly the same size, but they were close enough they could easily trade clothes.

"Actually, I like my girls tall," he said.

"Really?"

"Yeah, but tall girls hate short dudes."

"None of the six people you killed were tall girls."

"Why would I kill my type?" he said, angrily. I guess I touched a nerve.

Anyway.

I looked back at the tape on the floor. Tomoe had been strangled, and died here, but...even with the tape here, I found it hard to believe. I glanced sideways, and Zerozaki had his eyes shut, and his palms pressed together, observing a moment of silence.

"....."

I hesitated for a moment, then followed suit.

Only then did we start examining the scene.

"...hmm."

There was something on the white tape outline's right hand. It was too dark to see well (but we couldn't exactly turn the lights on) but it looked like a small circle made from black tape.

".....? Did they find something lying there?"

"No, look," Zerozaki said, crouching down. "There's something written here."

"Damn it, if only we had a little more light."

"Hold your horses. Your eyes'll get used to the dark."

This took some time, but we didn't have any other options.

At last our eyes adjusted enough to read it.

On the carpet...

...in red letters.

"Some sort of algebraic fraction?" one of us said.

First there was an X, with a diagonal line after that, followed by a Y. The letters were all misshapen and hard to make out, but I couldn't see any other possible meaning.

"What the hell does X/Y mean?"

"Beats me."

"It's red – is this written in blood?"

"Nah, magic marker," I said, standing up.

Letters written next to a dead body's right hand.

Was this a dying message?

"Wait, are we sure that's the right hand? Can't tell from the tape which way the body was facing."

"Oh, yeah. But Zerozaki, if she wasn't lying face down, could she write at all? Assuming this was written by Tomoe at all."

"...mm, I suppose there is a chance the killer wrote it. But what the hell is X/Y? Math? It's not an equation, so you can't do anything with it."

"Maybe it isn't finished."

"Augh, then we can't do anything. We can't just guess what the full equation would have been."

Zerozaki walked away, and sat down in the corner, leaning his back against the wall. He yawned. "Getting sleepy," he said. "You figure anything you yet?"

"The dying message alone is pretty significant. Otherwise..."

I glanced around the room. There were no signs of a struggle. Nothing seemed to be missing.

"The robbery angle isn't looking likely."

Which left a grudge. But why would a girl who just turned twenty have anyone who hated her that much?

I pondered this as I looked around the room. The police had already been over it with a fine-toothed comb, but seeing the scene with my own eyes helped fuel the imagination.

It might come in handy.

"Dude..." Zerozaki said.

He was watching me work. It seemed pretty clear he had no intention of helping, but I hadn't expected him to. It would be like expecting something from the surface of the water.

"You're pretty used to this, aren't you?" he observed.

"I have some experience, yes."

"What kind of experience leads you to be this broken before you turn twenty? I can't begin to imagine."

"Again, says the psycho killer. I should stop pointing that out, I guess. Yeah, well, I haven't lived what you'd call a decent life. No, it was decent enough. I never was."

"Hmm. I don't really like myself that much," Zerozaki said, in even tones. "But looking at you, I start to feel pretty good about myself."

"I could say the same thing. I'm pretty far from ordinary, but not as messed up as you. That thought is a comfort."

"I suppose."

"Same here."

".....why is it people die?"

"You kill them."

"Yeah, but not that, I mean, why? Apoptosis? Evolution? Genes? Cells? Or just natural limitations on functions?"

"I heard the limit on the human life span is more or less a hundred years. No matter the age, no matter what part of the world."

"Hunh."

"Comes down to biological diversity. But what's the point of living longer anyway? I can't see any point in living two or three hundred years. I've lived 19 years and two months, and I'm already sick of it."

"You're fed up?"

"No, I just can't stand it. I'm doing okay for now, but at this rate...I think my ability to handle it all will run out in two or three years."

"Ka ha, but I bet you thought the same damn thing when you were fourteen. You were sure you'd kill yourself in a year or two."

"I did. But I was too weak."

"Chicken."

"Yeah. You know, I always wanted to be a bird."

"Even if that's true, you didn't want to be a chicken. They can't even fly."

"I'm kidding. But I do think anyone who's lived ten or twenty years and doesn't start to think about death and God is probably really shallow."

"God and Death, hunh?"

"Yes. You spend the time before that learning about life. You have to know life to think about death, so you need a thorough education in life first. If you want to kill someone, no matter who it is, they must first be alive. No matter how hard I try, I can't go kill John Lennon."

Or Emoto Tomoe.

"So tell me, Zerozaki, what is living?"

"Your heart beating?" he said, putting no thought into it at all.

"No," I said. "Biological functions do not equal living. Anyway, supposing there was someone who had learned about death before they learned how to live. What kind of person would they turn out to be? Would they even be something you could identify as human? They're alive, but think only of death, recollect the end before the beginning. What can we call such a being?"

"Death himself. Or...," he met my eye, hesitated, then pointed at me. He said nothing more. There was nothing he needed to say.

"Mental gymnastics, again," I concluded.

Running away.

"...right, so like I asked earlier, here you are, breaking in, getting yourself awfully involved for a bystander, investigating the case...is there a reason?"

"There is," I said. I meant to say there wasn't, but accidentally went the other way. I don't even know which one I really meant.

"Okaaaay. But you don't like or hate Aoi. So the reason you're taking action must be something else. You barely even met



the other three...oh, wait."

An idea hit him, and he clapped his hands.

"This is for Emoto Tomoe?"

Tomoe.

The poor girl, killed right after her birthday party.

That alone would not move me. No more than starving children on the other side of the world do. If there was an earthquake in some distant land that killed thousands, I would feel nothing. I didn't care if there was a serial killer on the loose in my own damn city. There was no way my mental state was flexible enough to grieve just because someone I vaguely knew had died.

But.

There were exceptions.

"I...would have liked to talk to her a little more."

"....."

"That's all, really."

Zerozaki nodded. "Well, one thing's for sure. It's a masterpiece."

Like he said, there was no real need for me to do this, and it wasn't like me to do it. What I was doing was not normal behavior for me.

It was a stupid thing to do, but it wasn't a mistake.

Zerozaki yawned again.

"If you're bored, go home."

At least don't get in the way.

He shook his head. "I'm good. How'll you lock the door if I leave, anyway?"

"There are plenty of ways to lock a door without a key."

"You know some useless crap, then."

I was joking, of course.

Zerozaki closed his eyes and fell asleep. It felt like I was in some other dimension, watching myself sleep. I searched her room until four in the morning, but didn't find anything else of note.

".....but."

That didn't really matter. I'd spent the latter half of that time not trying to find anything, not investigating anything, just staring at the tape outline in the middle of the room.

Just remembering.

The time I'd spent here Saturday night.

The chaos and commotion.

The noise and bustle.

If I may be allowed a moment of romanticism, this was my way of sending Tomoe off. An interpretation that was very unlike me, but it was an idea I found hard to dismiss.

For now.

"Okay, let's go."

"You satisfied?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

We left the building, and went our separate ways.

We did not say good-bye.

We did not promise to meet again.

Chapter 4 – Brutal(ity) Red  
Aikawa Jun  
Humanity's Strongest Consultant

**There's no meaning.**

**I know.**

**I know.**

**I know.**

**Do you?**

May 18<sup>th</sup> – a Wednesday.

Second period class ended, giving way to the mid-day break. When I had second period classes, I never ate lunch (cafeterias were too crowded) so I usually went straight to the room where our core classes were taught.

Core classes.

Classmates.

Aoi Mikoko, Atemiya Muimi, Usami Akiharu, and Emoto Tomoe...

I had not laid eyes on any of them this week. This was no coincidence; I'm sure none of them came to school. Tomoe for obvious reasons; but the other three had not died or been murdered. Perhaps Tomoe's case explained their absence; perhaps it was typical college student laziness.

I'd made no further breakthroughs. The two cops – Sasaki and Kazuhito – didn't pay me a visit, and nobody else involved had contacted me. I was even waiting for Kunagisa to call me back. And I had obviously not seen Zerozaki around.

Since I had no access to the newspaper or TV, I wasn't sure how the media were treating Tomoe's death, if they were covering it at all; likewise, I did not know if there had been any further deaths in the slasher case.

I had not tried to find out.

I was just waiting.

I was used to waiting.

"...too hot. I feel like a slug," I muttered, as I headed from Meigakukan to Youyoukan. Outside for less than a hundred

meters, the hardest hundred meters I'd ever walked. The heat beat down on me, a phrase I had never before meant literally. Kobe and Houston are hot, but nothing like as unpleasant as this. The kind of syrupy wet heat that settles over a basin like Kyoto. I forced myself to keep walking, up the stairs to the Youyoukan's second floor. Inside, I could breathe again at last.

There...

I saw someone I recognized.

It wasn't recognition that made me notice her, however; it was the astounding neon pink track suit, the kind of garish outfit that you couldn't *not* notice.

With those brown curls, and that outfit, she'd like right at home crouching in front of a convenience store, snarling at anyone who passed by.

Atemiya Muimi, of course.

She was talking to some boy, probably another classmate. I didn't want to interrupt, so I started to move straight past them.

"Oh, Ii-kun!" she said.

"Yo," the guy said. Awfully friendly. He had light brown hair, and a friendly smile. Who was he, again? I was pretty sure I didn't know any surfers. He must just be some random classmate.

"So, uh..." Muimi said, forcing a smile. "How...I don't know what to say. How you been?"

"Coming to school. Like always."

"Oh. Yeah, you would, Ii-kun."

She shook her head. She seemed too tired to even keep that smile going. Couldn't blame her.

"What about you? Haven't seen you here, but..."

"Yeah....well..." she said, and trailed off. She seemed like the kind of person who did not willingly share their weakness with strangers. I wasn't one of those people myself, but I didn't find it particularly hard to understand.

"Okay, I got to prepare for this presentation, so I gotta scoot. See ya around," the guy said, and bounded off towards the stairs.

"Always making a fuss," Muimi said. "Normally such a slacker, but when he gets a chance to show off, class or not, he's always got to make a huge deal about it. His presentation should be good for a laugh."

"So he *is* in this class."

"....."

Muimi stopped moving completely for several seconds, and then she turned to stare at me with an audible creaking sound.

"Did...you seriously forget him?"

"Mm? Oh, um, didn't Mikoko tell you? I've got a terrible memory, can't remember classmates that well. If you say his name, I might remember, but..."

I waited, but it took Muimi a very long time to tell me his name. Like she couldn't believe she had to do this.

".....Usami Akiharu."

"Oh."

Yeah.

I wouldn't believe that one either.

".....is he that forgettable?"

"Compared to you? He doesn't go around wearing pink track suits," I started to say, but then thought better of it. Muimi seemed like the kind of person who hit when she was mad. And not just once or twice. If I teased her the way I had Mikoko, I'd suffer for it.

"No, this is all my memory's fault."

"You've got to do something about that."

"But I suppose he isn't that memorable, comparatively. He's not as wound up as Mikoko, after all. I know a lot of eccentric people...no, that makes it sound like I know a lot of people. Correction. I only know eccentric people. Compared with them, normal people just don't make as strong an impression."

"Normal people," Muimi said, with a malicious grin.

"What, am I wrong?"

"Well, you're not a great judge of character."

"Oh?"

"Akiharu's got a much more twisted personality than you give him credit for," she said, glancing at the door he'd left through. "You'll find out for yourself, in time."

Then her expression changed like someone had pointed a remote at her.

"Anyway, I got to talk to you. Let's go to the lounge."

Without waiting for me to answer, she started walking. There was a student lounge a short walk down the hall to the right of this room. I figured it would be crowded at lunch, but it was fairly empty. There was a sign on the door that said "No trespassing" in red gothic font; a prank the students had pulled a few years ago, and that everyone had summarily ignored for so long it seemed a waste of time to take it down.

Muimi went in and sat down.

The lounge was full of smoke. When she smelled it, Muimi reached inside her pocket, but remembered in time and stopped herself. It was one thing to maintain principles, but it seemed a bit silly to avoid smoking in a room already full of it. Pointing that out seemed unlikely to get her to change her mind, though.

"So...what?"

"Don't be an idiot. There's only one thing I'd want to talk with you about."

"Tomoe?"

"Mikoko," she said, putting both arms on the table, and glaring up at me. A look that put even someone like me on guard. "You seen her since?"

"Since what?"

"I said, don't be stupid. The cops went to see you, too."

"Yeah." I remembered Sasaki and Kazuhito, but they weren't the kind of people I wanted to remember. "They came to see you, too?"

"Yeah. A nasty pair."

"Man and a woman?"

"Yeah, the man was straight out of the X-Files, and the

woman seemed like the type you'd go see in an underground prison. I don't exactly like cops to begin with, and cops like them...well," she sat up. "Tomoe's funeral was yesterday."

She shot me an accusing frown.

"You didn't come."

"...nobody told me."

"Mikoko didn't come either. Only me and Akiharu."

"Hunh. Well, I guess...it must have been quite a shock."

"A shock.' Like it doesn't concern you."

It didn't, but I knew better than to say that.

"I'm guessing you weren't shocked at all? Even though Tomoe's been murdered."

"It was shocking enough when they told me. But three days later? My emotions smooth over. The past is nothing but memories."

"Since I was Tomoe's friend, I'd love to get pissed at you right now, but...you're right," she said, bitterly. "Our hearts aren't that fragile. I'm tough to begin with. Three days, and I'm feeling well enough to come to school. But that first day was a bitch. She was right there, and then..."

She snapped her fingers.

And fell silent. It was a restless silence, not an awkward one, but uncomfortable nonetheless.

"Akiharu...looked well enough."

"Did he?"

"...yeah."

"If you say so," she said, but she clearly disagreed. Just like with the 'twisted personality' line, she implied but did not say.

What did she mean?

But she changed the subject before I could figure it out.

"...they say you were the last one to hear her voice."

"...yeah. On the phone, but yeah. Did Mikoko tell you? Or the police?"

"Mikoko," Muimi hung her head. "I went to her house after



the funeral yesterday. I think it'll be a while before she recovers."

"Oh."

"Is that it?"

"What do you mean?"

"You hear Mikoko's feeling depressed, and that's all you have to say?"

"...that seems to be bugging everyone," I said. Muimi frowned at the word 'everyone' but she just sighed, and stretched.

"You're so *dense*."

"What? I couldn't hear you."

"Forget it. Maybe I'm speaking out of turn here. Certainly out of character. I was against the whole thing from the beginning, but..."

"What?"

"Never mind. Look, as a favor to me, no strings attached. Go see Mikoko."

She took a notepad out of her pocket, tore a page out, and handed it to me. It had Aoi Mikoko written on it, and an address and phone number.

"Such childish handwriting. Who wrote this?"

"I did."

"Oh...."

"Explains a lot, does it?"

"Didn't mean anything by it."

Fleeing her glare, I read the note. Horikawa Oike. Come to think of it, I'd heard that before...maybe...or maybe this was new information. I couldn't remember.

"Pretty far from here. Mikoko must take her Vespa to school."

"Nope, the bus. The school doesn't allow motorbikes."

"Oh, right."

I walked to school, myself. I had a bicycle, but I rarely used it. It wasn't that I liked walking, but I felt it was the means of transportation that was most like me.

"So what should I do when I get there?"

"She's depressed. Cheer her up. Say normal things like, 'Cheer up,' or, 'Don't feel sorry for yourself.' You can manage that, right?"

"Normal things...but wouldn't it be better if you said them? Oh, you did that yesterday. But if her friends can't help, what can I do?"

"...I'm trying to make this simple. Just go. That's all you have to do. See Mikoko, say something nice to her, and let the mood take care of the rest."

Mood?

But I didn't have a good reason to say no, and it gave me a decent excuse to make my move, so I said okay.

"I'll swing by after school today."

The bell for the start of third period rang.

"Shit," Muimi said. I agreed, inside.

Professor Inokawa, the Cerebus of Time.

"The bell already rang..."

"We're absent even if we rush in there now. He won't even let us in."

"Oh well. I was looking forward to seeing Akiharu's performance, too. No point in trying now."

Muimi threw in the towel quick enough. I hemmed and hawed a while longer, but could figure out no way to turn back time, so I gave up too.

"...what now? Wanna grab a bite to eat?"

"Cafeteria's still crowded."

"Oh, right. Guess I'll just hang out here, then."

"Then mind if I ask a few questions?" I said, seizing the chance. "Did anyone have a grudge against Tomoe?"

Muimi scowled at me. Like something was eating at her, something she knew perfectly well but couldn't stop checking and rechecking. She hesitated for a long time. "No," she said, decisively. "Not possible. She wasn't the type of girl who could be

hated by someone."

"Who could be hated...? That's an odd expression, like a junior high school student's overly literal translation of their English homework."

"But it's accurate. In my opinion. I've known her since high school, so I should know."

"...not to go off on a tangent, but how do the four of you know each other? Mikoko said you'd been friends since you were kids."

"Mikoko and I grew up together. We met Akiharu and Tomoe in high school."

"Mm? That doesn't add up."

"What?"

"Mikoko was born in April, and is 19...but Tomoe's 20."

"Oh, Tomoe repeated a grade in junior high."

"Oh..."

She hadn't been a *ronin* or studied abroad. She'd repeated a year. The idea had never occurred to me.

"She was in the hospital...missed about six months of school, and attended irregularly after that, so she didn't have enough days to move forward. Apparently it was pretty rough; she nearly died."

She nearly died.

She was...

...conscious of death.

"Hmm," I said, trying to remain calm. But I'm not sure I managed it. "That explains it."

That was the origin of Emoto Tomoe.

I nodded to myself, making sure Muimi didn't notice.

"So the four of us have been together since high school. Akiharu and Tomoe didn't know each other before that, either."

"...okay. Back to the main point."

"Um, so. Well. Tomoe...she's good at fitting in. Oh, no, that's not it...really, she's kinda like you, Ii-kun," Muimi said, pointing at

me. Twice. "Everyone's got a different idea of how close they want people to get, right? She was really good at figuring that out. She would get as close as she could, but never step over that line. Never touch the core, never get too far away, keeping the perfect distance, like an expert sword fighter."

"....."

That term always reminded me of Miiko.

"Tomoe was my friend, but sometimes I wonder if she ever really opened her heart to me. And I feel like I was never able to help her out at all."

"I don't believe that."

I said it, but I doubt it meant anything to her, and I didn't mean it much myself. Whether she was right or not, she was definitely close to the truth.

But Muimi. You've got one thing wrong. And that thing is far too mean to Tomoe. If you are really Tomoe's friend, you should never say that.

Tomoe is *not* like me.

We may tread a similar path, but fundamentally, she's totally different.

The one fundamentally like me is a psycho killer.

"A girl like that, nobody gets mad at her, even for stupid reasons."

"But...then who killed her?"

"I dunno. The slasher?"

"The slasher uses knives."

"...whatever. Someone killed her. Those cops looked like they knew what they're doing, they'll find the killer. Nothing we can do. Nothing at all."

Her voice was placid, but her expression was like daggers.

She didn't like this.

Her friend had been murdered, and she hated not being able to do anything about it. But there was nothing she could do. Undoubtedly she had no idea who might have killed Tomoe. No



enough. But they're desperate. Desperately trying to figure out how to escape the boredom of tomorrow. All their time is spent trying to kill time. Figuring out what to do tomorrow, and the day after that, twenty four hours a day. Racing to fill in all the blanks in their schedule books. And for what? What meaning does any of it have? If tomorrow doesn't come, will they care? Life is just killing time. If you're just living, then you might as well be dead. I think, anyway. Ah, sorry, none of this makes sense, does it?"

"No, it was very interesting."

I meant it.

And I felt I knew what Muimi meant by it.

She wondered...

...what Tomoe had been like.

What Tomoe had thought when she was murdered. Muimi was never allowed into Tomoe's heart, so that was an eternal mystery. If I could be allowed to guess, if my personal opinion as a bystander must be heard, then I would agree – those girls over there would not regret a thing.

"Cafeteria'll be emptying out by now," Muimi said, glancing at her watch, and standing up. "Let's eat. Ryouyuukan will have seats, for sure."

"No, sorry – you go on ahead. I'm not hungry."

"Suit yourself," she said, and turned to leave. Then she stopped, and turned around again. "Hey, how is it you know Mikoko turned 19 in April?"

"She told me."

"Let me change the question. How come you remember? You've got a bad memory, don't you? How would you remember something like that?"

A rude question, but since I'd forgotten what Akiharu looked like, perhaps she was right to ask it.

"There are reasons, but I can't explain them."

This did not appear to satisfy her, but she let it drop.

"I have one last question, Muimi. Do you know what X/Y

means?"

"X divided by Y."

"Right."

"Don't see what else it could mean."

"Yeah, probably. Thanks."

"What is it?"

"A dying message Tomoe left. I don't know what it means."

Muimi frowned at the words 'dying message' but didn't ask how I knew. She thought about it a minute longer, and then said, "Well, anyway, say hi to Mikoko for me," and left the lounge.

I waved after her.

I sat in the lounge thinking about nothing for a bit, but the smoke started getting to me, so I went outside. I put my hand in my pocket, and felt a piece of paper. I took it out, and it was the paper Mikoko's address was written on.

"....oh, all right."

Maybe it was a good opportunity.

The rest of my classes did not take attendance. I thought about it for three further seconds, then decided to excuse myself from them.

When I died...

Not only would I have no regrets...

I would be relieved.

I left the lounge, passing any number of people who were only living.

## 2

As nice as Tomoe's apartment building had been, the place Mikoko rented near Horikawa Oike was a grade or two more luxurious. It was a bit too fancy for a student to live in; it was downright imposing in its splendor.

"Okay..."

The bus from school had dropped me off outside around two, and it was now half past three. In other words, if I applied logical, objective observation and analysis to the situation, I had

managed to waste an hour and a half standing in the lobby to her building.

"...so what am I doing? I'm being afraid to visit a girl alone in her room, aren't I?"

I said it aloud to try and embarrass myself into movement, but it didn't seem to help. I just felt stupid. Come to think of it, this might be the first time I knew what I was going to do, but took this long to actually go through with it. With someone I knew well, I'd never hesitate, but I'd only known Mikoko a few days (or nearly a month, actually.) It wasn't a big deal to me, not really, but I wasn't sure she'd think it appropriate.

No.

Truth was, I was so used to being passive that I was deeply uncomfortable taking the initiative like this.

"This is seriously lame."

An hour and a half was simply too long. It was well past ridiculous. I finally made up my mind, and stepped into the building. Unlike Tomoe's building, there were no autolock doors, so I didn't need to buzz up first; security took the form of camera watching the entire lobby. All it took was a little creativity to get through an autolock door, but cameras required technical skill to bypass, and were a far more effective measure. Of course, the most effective security was actual security guards, like the ones in the unreal place Kunagisa lived.

I took Muimi's note out.

Fourth floor. Room 3.

I stepped onto the elevator, and pushed the 4. In no time, I reached the fourth floor, and was walking down the hall. There were more security cameras in front of the elevator, and down the halls in each direction. This was starting to seem a little paranoid. More cameras than inner city convenience stores. Did some big name celebrity live here incognito? Kyoto didn't seem like the place for that sort of thing, but maybe that's what made it perfect.

Dismissing such speculation as a waste of time, I found the



door to room 3. There seemed no point in prolonging my hesitation any further, so I pressed the buzzer right away. It produced a fairly ordinary bell sound, and I heard something moving in the room. I figured she was a girl, it might take her some time to prepare, and steeled myself for a wait, leaning against the wall opposite the door.

"Coming!"

Um.

That was fast. Which would have been good, normally, but in this case I had a sinking feeling. As a bystander, my sinking feelings were always accurate. This was going to be a doozy.

"You're awful late, Muimi. Something up?"

Click.

The lock slid back, and the door opened.

"....." "....."

I missed my chance to say something.

And Mikoko couldn't speak.

She had hard locked.

The three finger salute would not fix this.

"Ah.....ah. Ahhhhhhhh....ah."

Mikoko turned red.

Then white.

Then red again.

"Ciao," I said.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

She let out an ear-splitting shriek, and then slammed the door so hard I think the frame bent. The world shuddered, and then there was a silence, as if nothing had happened.

"....."

At least the security cameras would clear me of any wrong doing if that scream prompted any emergency response.

"So...yeah."

She had clearly just woken up; her hair had some serious bedhead going on, and as a finishing touch, she'd been wearing pajamas with bunnies on them...that were not buttoned up all the

way. Not at *all* the way any girl would present themselves to the opposite sex.

"Why!?" she sobbed, apparently collapsed against the inside of the door. She was clearly crying. "Why why why why why why? Why is Ii-kun here? Muimi was supposed to come! Like amateur detective Asagi Semimaru solves a locked room beheading in seconds flat, the killer caught red-handed! My head! I don't understand! Why? This can't be real, it can't it can't it can't! It's a mirage! It's not real! It's a dream, a really bad dream!"

That sounded like panic to me.

I can't say I was totally calm myself, but dealing with someone this obviously at her wit's end tended to calm you down. Okay. Muimi was supposed to be visiting, and that cowardly delinquent had forced that duty on me, without telling Mikoko.

Situation: Understood.

That gave me room to maneuver.

"Uh, I can explain that later. Mind letting me in? I can't just stand out here."

"Go home! Right now! No, wait, I'm sorry, don't go! I can clean! And get ready! Wait, please! Forget you saw anything!"

"I've already seen it. Let me in."

"Absolutely not!"

With that brutal rejection, Mikoko ran into the back of the room. I heard her thumping about in there for a while, and what sounded like the sound effects track from an old school kung fu film. That was some violent cleaning. No need to do all that on my account, I thought, but gave up and leaned against the wall again. Mikoko did not let me in for a full half hour. It was four o'clock before I stepped inside.

The room itself was not that much different from the layout of Tomoe's, but there was a *lot* more furniture. Apparently Mikoko was quite the shop-a-holic. It wasn't *messy*, but the sheer amount per cubic foot left it feeling busy.

"Ah ha ha. Wait a minute, I'll get some tea."

Mikoko was wearing a pink camisole and shorts. Far more skin on display than with the pajamas, but perhaps that wasn't the point. She'd fixed her hair, and looked like a different person.

She put cups down on the table. Not filled with tap water, but with delicious *mugicha*. She even put ice in it.

She sat down across from me.

"So, um, Ii-kun, what brings you here?" she said. She was still acting a little weird; if she walked down Shinkyogoku the riot police would have their eye on her. "Um, Muimi should be here soon; she's a little late! Gosh, what could be keeping her?"

"Uh, she sent me," I said, raising a hand to keep her getting any more flustered.

"Oh!" she said. She looked surprised, then angry, then embarrassed, then pleased. "Oh, Muimi...." she said, settling on exasperated.

"Don't worry, I won't stay long. Relax. I heard you were depressed, but I'm glad to see you're doing better."

Mikoko hung her head at the word 'depressed'. Perhaps it had been tactless of me, but I was never good at things like this.

Her friend had been murdered, but that wasn't all. Mikoko had been the one who found her friend's body. She was the first to see that lifeless corpse, to know her friend would never move again. That image must be burned into her eyelids. That was not a mental state you could dismiss with a common word like 'depressed'.

"Ii-kun, were you worried when I didn't come to school?"

"Um, yeah, I guess."

It wasn't strictly accurate, but the difference was negligible.

"Thank you!" Mikoko said, looking overjoyed. "I'm so glad to hear that! I'm so happy you came!"

"It's not that big a deal. I didn't even bring anything."

It had just occurred to me that it was quite rude to visit someone else's house empty-handed, particularly if they weren't feeling well. But I'd come straight from school, and hadn't thought

of it.

"Never mind that," Mikoko said. "It's not like I'm sick or something. I just...going to school would...remind me of Tomo."

"I imagine there's plenty here to remind you of her, too."

"Well, yeah, but..." she smiled weakly. "But you visiting really cheered me up. I think I can come to school tomorrow."

"School doesn't matter at a time like this. The police came here too, right?"

"Yeah, several times. The big guy and the scary woman. I know it's their job, and I found the body, and it's a murder case and everything..."

"...who could have killed Tomoe?" I said absently, as if wondering aloud – but loud enough that Mikoko could hear.

"...I don't know..." she whispered. The answer I expected. "Tomo wasn't the kind of girl people could hate."

"Muimi said the same thing. But...is it even possible to live without anyone hating you? I have my doubts about that."

"Eh?"

"You and Tomoe were friends, so you may not have realized it, but I think you need to consider the possibility that someone did hate her. Even if it was simple jealousy."

Mikoko said nothing. It was painful for her, clearly, the pain showing on her face so raw I found myself apologizing. For all she was trying to put on a brave face, she was still far from ready to talk about it.

"...I knew I shouldn't have come."

"Eh? Why?" This time I had meant to say it under my breath, but she'd heard me anyway. "Don't say that, Ii-kun, I *am* glad you came."

"But...it just seems like you're forcing yourself to act cheered up for my benefit."

It would be far better for her to be with someone like Muimi, someone she could open up to and say how she really felt.

"That's not true," Mikoko said. "Even fake cheer turns into

real cheer if you repeat the lie. And I mean it when I say I'm happy you came here. Even if Muimi made you come. Against your will."

"It's not against my will. I wouldn't have agreed if it was."

"Really?"

"No, you're right, I'm easy to talk into things."

"I knew it!" Mikoko said, grinning.

I sighed, and stretched. "All kidding aside, how are you doing? Starting to get over the shock?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I just..." Mikoko glanced to my right. I followed her gaze, and there was a pile of magazines and newspapers. "...back when I was in elementary school...if you don't mind listening a bit?"

"Go ahead."

"I think I was in the third grade. There was some construction going on in the building. Trucks and excavators were in and out of the grounds. One day there was an accident, and a truck full of sand crashed into a building full of first graders."

"Jesus. That's a hell of an accident."

"Yeah. The wall broke down, and sand poured in the classroom. Some first graders were buried in it, and there was a huge panic. Of course we were just kids, so it was all fun for us. I remember Muimi surfing on the side of the sand."

"Ha..."

I could see her being that kind of kid.

"So the next day I got up early and grabbed the newspaper. I was so proud that my school was going to be in the paper. Of course, the accident was nothing to be proud of, but the being in the newspaper part was exciting, right?"

"You were a kid, after all."

"But...it wasn't. There was not one word about it." I'd never seen Mikoko this self-deprecating. "The biggest thing that had ever happened to me was of no importance at all from a national point of view. I don't remember what was on the front page, but I felt like it was telling me how pointless my existence was. What I thought

was amazing was meaningless to anyone else. That was really sad."

"....."

"I feel the same way now."

She pointed at the papers and magazines.

I could imagine. A sensational case like the Kyoto Serial Killings might make the papers, but an ordinary murder case like this would hardly rate the attention of the press. They might have a quick sidebar about it the day after, but that was it.

I fell silent. Mikoko said nothing more. For a while we sat in silence. It was Mikoko who broke it at last, and with a complete non sequitur.

"Ii-kun, have you and Asano gone antique shopping lately?"

"Hunh?" I gaped at her. "What do you mean?"

"Oh! Sorry, that was weird, I didn't mean to ask about it!"

"I don't mind, really."

Why did Mikoko know I helped Miiko with her antique shopping? I didn't think Miiko would have told her about that. Then again, I may or may not have promised to do that with her...oh, right, Mikoko was actually awake at the time.

"Has that been bothering you?"

"Eh? Um, um, um, wh-what?"

I'd promised to help Miiko with her antique shopping in return for her letting Mikoko stay the night. I had been asking if she felt bad about forcing me into that, but her panicked reaction didn't really seem appropriate. Confusing.

"It's nothing to trouble yourself about, really. I do it all the time."

"You do?"

"Yeah. She loves shopping. Did you see inside her closet? Such a small room, but she keeps buying more antiques. She does sell them again once she's admired them a while – says art must be shared."

Then again, I knew she frequently sold them for more than she paid, so Miiko was definitely a crafty one.

"So my job is to carry things. I am male, after all; I can carry more than her. Might as well use your neighbors. I'm not a big fan of antiques personally, but nothing against them, so I go when she asks."

"Hunh. I see. You often...go out with Asano," Mikoko said, softly, as if it was hard to say.

"Not *often*, but...she's been in Kyoto a long time, went to school here, lived alone the whole time, so she's shown me around the place a bit. Seimei Jinja or the Philosopher's Walk, you know."

"I've heard of them. Not my thing."

"Oh? I thought you said you knew Kyoto well."

How could you know Kyoto well if you didn't like temples and shrines? The idea struck me as odd.

"Oh, I know...other things," she said, evasively. "Why do you have to go and remember things like that, anyway? Anyway, Ii-kun...you and Asano...you're close?"

She'd asked me something like that before. It was really bugging her for some reason. Was there something between them? I couldn't see how any real bonds could form in one night, so why was she so intent on making sure we were friends?

"I suppose...she's interesting enough, so we're more close than far. But it's more like she helps me out. I borrow her car sometimes. She has a Fiat 500. A Fiat 500."

"Oh...so-so are you sure about this?" Mikoko did not seem to be much of a gearhead (hence the scooter debacle) so she completely ignored the important point at the end in favor of a line of questioning that baffled me completely. "Should you really be hanging out in another girl's room?"

"Hunh? You mean...you want me to leave?"

"No! Ii-kun, if you and Asano go out all the time, then, um...argh, you blockhead!"

She turned bright red, and thumped the table. I had no idea why she was getting so emotional. This made no sense to me at all. It seemed like I just made her mad no matter what I did.

"I don't know what's going on. Sorry?" I said.

Mikoko clutched her head. "Let me put this another way," she said. "You and Asano often go shopping together?"

"Like I said."

"So will you go shopping with me?"

What logical leap led her to that conclusion, I could not begin to imagine, but the desperate gleam in her eyes made it seem like this was a matter of life and death for her, and I couldn't bring myself to ask.

"Um, sure. I've got no reason to refuse."

"Really? You mean it? You're not just saying that?"

Mikoko was leaning all the way forward, biting her lip like a kid about to burst into tears. Not the way a nineteen-year-old college student generally displayed emotion.

"Wow, you're really intense about this."

"Answer me!"

"...okay, yeah. I promise. What about Saturday?"

"Really? REALLY really?"

"I don't lie. Usually."

"You promise you'll do it?"

"Is there something you want? Or..."

"You promised! If you forget, I'll be *really* mad!"

Mikoko didn't exactly leave me any way out of this except to promise. It wasn't like I had no other reason to do this, so I agreed. At last Mikoko accepted it, and calmed down a little. She drank her tea in a single gulp.

"Sorry," she said. "I get a little carried away sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

"Okay, all the time," she admitted.

Hmm.

Mikoko had certainly not recovered from the shock of Tomoe's death, but she did seem to have cheered up enough that there was no danger of her following after Tomoe and killing herself. She seemed more or less her old self. A few things she said



made less sense than usual, but it was well within the margin of error. She'd be okay. She'd be totally recovered by Saturday.

"Then I'd better be off," I said. "See you Saturday."

"Eh, eh, eh, you're going already? Are you mad at me after all?"

"No, I said I wasn't going to stay long, remember?"

"Uh, um," she said, stopping me. "Um...um...Ii-kun..."

"What?"

"Um..."

Mikoko thought for a bit. For a while. Then...

"What do you think Tomo was trying to say to you?"

Her last phone call.

The thing Tomoe had left unsaid.

"I really don't know. I'd never talked to her before, so how would I know? I don't even know why she would have had something to say to me at all. But you might know, Mikoko. You might have a better guess than I do."

"I..." she said, hanging her head. "I don't."

"....."

"Tomo...wasn't the kind of girl who said things."

She didn't say things.

She didn't open her heart. She kept her distance.

"It was like being friends with someone through a sheet of bulletproof glass. Tomo never once said anything to me that really mattered."

"....."

So why had she...

...tried to say something...

...to me?

"...nonsense."

"Hunh? What?"

"You don't seem in any state to answer much, so I'll only ask one thing. If I can?"

"Um....." she hesitated. "Wh-what?"

"What do you think X/Y means?"

"....."

Mikoko thought about it a few seconds. "I don't know," she said.

Right. Right.

I nodded. "Then I'll see you at school. And on Saturday."

I left Mikoko's room, and her apartment building. What now?

Horikawa Oike.

Pretty far from my apartment, but the walk would be no more than half an hour. Seemed like a waste to use the bus, so I started off on foot.

Never dreaming that humanity's strongest red was waiting in my room.

### 3

Near my apartment, around Senbon Demizu, I ran into Miiko. When she saw me, she came running over – not something she often did.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself. Off to work?"

"Nah, Hiezan."

"Oh, Suzunashi?"

Miiko nodded.

Szunashi Neon was Miiko's friend, who worked at Enryakuji on top of Hiezan. She was more than a little fucked in the head, to the point where people called her Violence Neon or Black Out Suzunashi. I'd met her a few times, but each time she'd spent the entire time lecturing me. She lectured a lot for someone so young. She had a lot of personality problems, but like Miiko, I found myself liking her.

"She's got something she needs to talk about, so I'll be out until tomorrow. Keep an eye on my place for me, will you? If anyone stops by, get their name, then get rid of them. If they look

dangerous, don't bother."

"Okaaay, sure."

"Also, you have a guest."

"A guest? I do?"

"Yeah," Miiko nodded. "She was in your room before I noticed. She's...something else. I can tell that much. Don't know who she is, but definitely a woman. Didn't seem like she planned to do anything, so I left her alone..."

A woman.....? What woman would come to my room....? I didn't know that many people, so you'd think I'd be able to narrow it down. From that information...

"Was she this tall? Then she's police."

"No, she's no cop. No way is she a cop," Miiko seemed very firm on that point. "And I met the cop you're referring to, I'd have known if it was her. Mmm...there was a car parked near the building that probably belongs to her. If you see that, I bet you'll know who it is."

And with that, she headed towards the parking lot. Today her jinbei said, 'peace'. She must be in a good mood, possibly because she was seeing Suzunashi.

I wondered what Suzunashi had called Miiko for. She wasn't really the type of person who invited anybody anywhere. Or who ever had 'something to talk about.' She might stick her neck in other people's problems, but Suzunashi was extremely unwilling to let anyone else get involved in her own issues.

"...interesting."

But I had my own problems. This guest. In my room. If not Sasaki, then who? Muimi or Mikoko? Seemed unlikely. Kunagisa was totally dedicated to her shut-in lifestyle, so it was physically impossible for her to be here.

I turned onto Nakadachiuri.

And saw the car.

"Yikes."

Now I knew. A bright red Cobra, parked on the curve as if

flipping the bird at the traffic laws. A monster of a machine, a class far beyond what Kyoto streets could handle.

"Oh, man. I do *not* want to go home."

I seriously considered turning tail and fleeing to Kunagisa's apartment, but if she found out I'd run away, there was no telling what she'd do to me. I had no choice but to drag myself up the stairs to my room.

I reached my door. I'd locked it, but I was not surprised to find it no longer locked. Vocal mimicry, lockpicking, and mind reading were like default skills for this woman. I opened the door, and sure enough, a consultant in a wine red dress was sitting on the window sill, legs folded, as if she owned the place.

As if she owned everything.

".....hello, Aikawa."

"I told you. Don't call me that."

".....hello, Jun."

"Better," she said, with a twisted grin.

Aikawa Jun.

Humanity's strongest consultant. I'd met her a month before, after the island incident. She'd said, "See you again sometime," like it was a really cool thing to say, and then shown up at my college the next day to hang. Until she left for her next job a week later, I was dragged bodily around by her with nary a chance to sleep. That marked her down as a dread red dead danger character to be avoided at all cost.

Objectively – as objective as I could be – she was an extremely wild, cool, attractive, admirable, and beautiful individual, but her personality and aura were so distinctive it made her unapproachable.

"Hmm..." she said, giving me a searching gaze. "You don't seem surprised."

"Oh, I am surprised, Jun. You're back in Kyoto?"

"Work. I'll get into that later. Oh, I got it; park a car like mine in a place like this, even you can work it out."

"That, and the person next door told me."

".....hunh, I was being careful not to be noticed. Impressive," she said. For a second, her eyes gleamed like daggers. Then she smiled sarcastically.

I took off my shoes and stepped into the room. I filled a cup with tap water and gave it to Aikawa. She said, "Thanks," and drank half, then put it on the window sill beside her.

Hmm. As if it was nothing. Someday I would love to find a way to genuinely surprise her.

"So what brings you back to Kyoto?"

"I said later for that noise. We've got catching up to do first. Nice place you've got here. The ideal environment."

"What part of it can possibly lead you to that opinion?"

"I don't mean it like that. And you know what I mean. So tell me, what have you been up to?"

"Nothing. Ordinary college life. Unlike you, I don't lead a yakuza's life."

"Ordinary college life?" she cackled.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing's funny at all. Nothing funny about having a classmate murdered and meddling in the case while hanging out with a psycho killer. That's just ordinary."

"....."

"Ha, so now you're surprised. Much better."

Aikawa hopped down off the window sill, and sat cross-legged on the tatami. In a short skirt. I chose not to wonder if that was intentional.

"...how did you know?"

"How do you think?"

She was smiling, like she was having fun, but what could possibly be lurking behind that smile was always so hard to read that just talking to her exhausted me. Since she was also extremely good at the cold read, anything going through my head would be immediately obvious to her, so it was like playing poker with my

cards on display. You could not handle her, even with care.

As long as you didn't go against her, she was nice.

And my type.

"I don't know. No idea. I never know what you're thinking."

"Cause you don't think. I'm a lone wolf...with a ton of friends. Even in Kyoto."

"How nice. Having friends is good. I admit it. With that in mind...in this case, which of your friends are we talking about?"

"Like Sasa Sasaki."

"....."

"Like Ikaruga Kazuhito."

"....."

"Like Kunagisa Tomo."

Aikawa took an envelope out of a black bag.

"This is from adorable little Tomo."

"...for me??"

"Yeah. What she promised, apparently."

I opened the envelope.

Ah ha.

Aikawa had gone to Shirosaki before visiting my apartment. While I might be an ordinary college student with no special powers, Kunagisa Tomo was (despite her personality) an expert specializing in computers. Her ties to Aikawa might be surprisingly deep.

Like Aikawa said, it was time to think. She had come here for a job. A job that required Kunagisa's help. Just like I had asked for her help with Tomoe's murder. And Kunagisa had asked Aikawa to deliver this to me. No, there was still something missing. There was no need to ask Aikawa to bring it to me, and no guarantee that Aikawa would agree to do that.

Which meant...the worst case scenario occur to me. Worst case scenarios almost always came true.

"So, about my fee. Everything you know about the Kyoto slasher."

She wasn't running errands, she was here to interrogate me.

"Jun, you're in Kyoto to..."

"Exactly. I'm here to give that crazy shit-for-brains a little lesson in morality."

Aikawa was a consultant.

Her 'work' could be just about anything – she 'consulted' on any topic there was. Aikawa did not specialize. It seemed like there was nothing she couldn't do. She would walk dogs, solve locked room murder mysteries, or take down a serial killer who had dismembered ten victims. If someone asked, and was willing to pay, she would do it. Of course, there weren't that many people weird enough to ask someone of her dizzying range of talents to walk a dog. At any rate, legal or illegal, if someone else couldn't do it, the red consultant would.

"As of last night, the Kyoto Serial Killer hit twelve victims. You spent long enough overseas I imagine you might not understand, but that is an exceptional number. Nothing like that has happened in Japan, let alone Kyoto. And the killer's identity is a complete mystery. Those in charge have no choice but to get off their fat asses and do something."

"Like hire you?"

She nodded.

"Not just me. They've hired public safety experts and contract killers and a bunch of other guys; I don't know the details, never bothered with that sort of networking. But I'm here to stop this nutjob dissection fetishist from killing anyone else."

"Sasaki hired you?"

"Can't say. I've got a code of silence or right to professional confidentiality or whatever," she fluttered a hand dismissively. "Anyway, this job's got a little more meat on it than that tiff at Wet Wing Raven Island."

A bit more meat on it. To her, taking down a serial killer was the definition of job satisfaction. No trace of fear. She was just looking forward to it. Like a child headed for an amusement park.

She was as dangerous as the red signified.

And that danger was focused on me.

"So. From what Kunagisa told me...you know something. You were going to share that with me, weren't you?" she purred, stroking my face. But when Aikawa purred, it didn't sound like a house cat. More like a tiger or a panther.

Damn you, Kunagisa!

So much for helping each other out!

You just sold me out! Without a second's thought!

"What's this? Averting your gaze, saying nothing? That looks hostile to me. Were you planning on keeping this from me? Breaking your contract? I thought that envelope was supposed to do the trick."

"Well, see. I was going to tell Kunagisa. If I tell you, that seems like...a betrayal. Immoral. Alienating. Rebellious. Whatever. Like I'm selling someone out, which just..."

"Oh?" she growled. If looks could kill I'd already be dead. In fact, given what she was likely to do to me now, I rather wished they could.

"You can tell Kunagisa, but you can't tell me? Fascinating. I had no idea you were so cold-hearted. It makes me so very sad. You'll do what Kunagisa says, but you won't do what I say. That makes it all very clear."

"No, I mean, if I tell Kunagisa, nothing bad happens, but if I tell you, you'll actually do something. That makes me directly involved, which is against my way of life."

"So I'm an active threat?"

"Aren't you?"

Aikawa did not disagree. She thought for a moment. Apparently logic did work with her, to a certain extent. Anything beyond that was hopeless of course, but she'd be pissed if I said that.

"You know Kunagisa would tell me. She couldn't keep a secret if her life depended on it. I'm just saving us all the time."



"Uh, yeah, I know. But still, I just..."

"Mm? Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh. I get it. I get it. You should have said."

She gave me the most evil smile I had ever seen, and beckoned. Every part of this sent shivers down my spine, chilling me to the bone.

"Wh-what is it you get?"

"C'mere. I'll be as mean as you want."

When I still didn't move, Aikawa went down on all fours, and crawled toward me. Looking up at me, but aggressively, daring me to respond. Then she wrapped herself around me, her palms sliding up my back, her body pressed against mine...

...her nails digging into me.

"So? What do you say?"

"Jun, this is seriously scary."

"My index finger is about slide between your ribs and puncture your kidney."

"-----"

"Don't get all stiff on me. It's bad for your health. You won't taste as good. So...I ask only out of curiosity. But which is scarier...the psycho killer? Or me?"

Aikawa licked the right side of my neck, right above the jugular. The sensation itself was extremely pleasurable, but the image of her biting into my throat paralyzed me with fear.

Damn it.

The psycho killer was waaaay better.

"...Jun, even I might have to fight back soon."

"Try it? Then I won't be mean to you ever again."

"....."

"Suit yourself. Either way, you're going to talk. There is no outcome here in which you do not tell me all about the psycho killer. It's a fixed point in time. But you *are* a friend. So I'm asking *nicely*. You like it when I'm nice? Or do you want me to get *nasty*?"

"Um...how are they different?"

At least with her arms around me I couldn't see her face. And she couldn't see mine. Not that this hid my abject terror in any way.

"How do you think?"

And then she actually bit my neck. My life was held between her teeth. Her canines teased the surface of my skin, her tongue keeping everything moist, her lips stroking my skin, her body pressed against my, her fingers crawling up my back...

"I give!" I yelped, pushing her away. "I can't fight any more! Forgive me!"

Aikawa smiled like an innocent child that had just learned about sarcasm. "Don't get so upset," she said. "I was just playing."

"You're bad for the heart, Jun."

"Ha ha ha. At least I know you're a *healthy* young man."

"Please, stop. Seriously."

I drained my cup of water, trying to calm myself down. My heart was already beating normally again, but the cold sweat proved beyond my ability to control.

I really couldn't handle her.

I should definitely have fled to Kunagisa's. Damn the consequences.

"Which is nonsense, of course."

And so.

I proceeded to tell Aikawa everything about Zerozaki Hitoshiki, leaving nothing out. I did try and leave out some key details, but given her high-psychic powers, that proved impossible. Each time she threatened, coaxed, forced or cajoled it out of me, proving once again how little free will I really had.

Zerozaki's description, height, clothes, distinctive features. How he talked. How we met. What we talked about. And even how we broke into Tomoe's apartment together.

It wasn't like Zerozaki was a friend. He was the same as me, a reflection of myself in a mirror, but I had promised him nothing, and he had demanded nothing from me.

Even so.

I was certainly dejected by my own lack of grit.

"Hunh," Aikawa said, when I finished. Her smile had vanished, and she considered things seriously for a moment. "So...Zerozaki, you said? Zero and zaki equaling Zerozaki?"

"Yes. At the least, that's the name he gave."

"Zerozaki Hitoshiki. That's an awful name," she said, as if it was a giant pain, something she just did not want to deal with. I had never seen her look like that before. It was oddly refreshing.

"An awful name? Awful how?"

"Oh, no, it's not the name itself that's awful. Just...Zerozaki? That's a very...unusual name."

"But it might not be his real name. He's a pretty bright guy, might have the sense not to give his real name to someone he'd just met."

"That's not possible. Even if he was a fake name, choosing 'Zerozaki' as your alias is downright abnormal. And if it is his real name, well..."

Aikawa fell deeper into thought. Once she started to think, she blocked the rest of the world off. Sitting next to her, it felt like I'd turned invisible. Or worse, since the invisible man still existed. I'd become thin air.

"Even for fun, nobody'd be dumb enough to ID themselves as one of the killing names. Zerozaki. They rank over Susukino. Better than Nyounomiya or Yamiguchi, but...definitely would be better if it's a fake name. Of course, if I'm talking ideals, then ideally, it would simply be a coincidence, but that can't be true. I've never seen a coincidence that convenient. It does explain why Kunagisa and her Team couldn't dig up anything."

"...something bad about the name Zerozaki?"

"Really bad. They're the worst. If you said I was like the Zerozakis, I'd be horribly insulted. That's how bad the Zerozakis are. I don't really want to explain more. I honestly don't want to be associated with the Zerozaki clan in any way shape or form, even to

the degree of explaining them. What's dangerous here isn't the man himself, but the Zerosaki name. So maybe it doesn't matter. This is an unusual case, I think. All that aside...you're sure he's the Kyoto Serial Killer?"

"Yeah. He said he was."

"He only said he was...you never saw him killing?"

"Right," I nodded.

"I don't suppose there's any chance he's delusional enough to just say things like that?"

"I suppose. It's certainly possible. But I don't think it's the case."

"Yeah? But, he has a face tattoo! On the right side only? People like that don't even exist in Chicago! How is someone so memorable evading the police, leaving them utterly clueless?"

"Um, well..."

I'd certainly considered the possibility. But from what he told me, I could find no reason to disbelieve him, and it didn't really matter to me anyway.

Whatever the truth was...

It changed nothing for me.

Maybe he wasn't the slasher.

But...

"He's definitely a psycho killer," I said. "You know as well as anyone, Aikawa. I don't lead a normal life. Not in Kobe, not in Houston, and not here. Even on that island, I almost got myself killed. Maybe my life isn't as crazy as yours, but I've seen my share of hell."

And I wasn't exactly in heaven now.

"I've never seen him kill anyone, but he did try to kill me. He was holding a tiny little knife, but it might as well have been a naginata or a Minimi on the fearsome scale."

"Hmm," Aikawa nodded, letting that sink in. "I suppose what really matters is that there's someone in Kyoto with the skills to do the job, claiming he's doing it. That's enough."

"Enough?"

"Yeah. With the other information I've collected, he seems a decent target. Still just a suspect, maybe, but at this point it'll be faster to just go check him out. I always did prefer a hands on approach to work. Anyway," she said, looking back at me. "Forget about my business, what the hell are you doing? Kunagisa and Sasaki both told me you're sticking your nose in some boringly ordinary case?"

"I got mixed up in it."

"And then you stuck your nose in it. Breaking into the victim's room? Some bystander you are."

True enough.

"I don't get you sometimes," Aikawa said. "Do you have no principles? No style? What you say and what you do are nothing alike."

"That discrepancy is my special flavor."

"Nope. Are you not able to see yourself objectively?"

"I think I can..."

"Bystander my ass. You're a plot contrivance. Do what you want. Your choice. Not my right to say anything. This alone is none of my business."

"Now who's cold-hearted?"

"Not me. Not at all. Learn from what you do, child. Clean up your own mess. Finish what you start. Like I say before. Never half-ass anything. Oh, and," as if she'd just remembered (unlikely), "A message from Kunagisa."

She pointed at the envelope next to me.

"...what?"

"Don't you dare cheat on me! Nothing farther than a peck on the cheek, Ii-chan! I love you, bye bye."

Aikawa said this in Kunagisa's voice, a flawless imitation.

I raised a hand to show I understood.

It was late enough that I should probably start thinking

about dinner. I invited Aikawa, but she wanted to get after Zerozaki, and left.

Before she went, I asked her what she thought X/Y was.

"Don't ask what you already know," she snorted.

As I watched her go, I sighed.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Aikawa Jun.

Odds were she'd find him sometime tomorrow. The information I'd given her wouldn't be much help, but it was more than enough for her. She operated in realms I could not begin to imagine, and had conquered all those realms. What she put her mind to got done.

The two of them would clash. Humanity's Strongest versus the Human Failure. The outcome was clear. Zerozaki Hitoshiki was a Psycho Killer, but Aikawa Jun killed killers. A heightened ability to kill was no match for the sort of overwhelming dominance Aikawa showed in two or three hundred ways. No matter what happened, you did not want her as an enemy. Truth be told, you did not want her as an ally either. The red consultant was too powerful a being to involve yourself with at all. The only saving grace was that she was on the side of good, but that left no room for anything else.

"Can you survive, Zerozaki?"

I was a little worried.

And extremely sympathetic.

But I did not dwell on it.

What happened in other worlds did not interest me. Even if that world lay on the other side of the mirror.

I thought about my own world.

I reached down, and opened Kunagisa's envelope.

Me (Narrator)  
Main Character

Aoi Mikoko  
Classmate

Chapter Five: (Im)moral Compass

**I love you I love you I love you.**

On Saturday, May 21<sup>st</sup>, I woke up early.

"...time to get up."

I'd had a bad dream. I felt like someone had tried to kill me, and I was trying to kill them. I was doing everything I could to hurt them, but they kept hurting me instead, and I was running and running and running and running and running until I caught up with myself running away from me. Although I was in the greatest peril of my life, it was also somehow exhilarating.

What I couldn't remember made it a nightmare; having a nightmare left me covered in sweat.

I sat up, and looked at the clock. It was 5:50. I'd promised to meet Mikoko at ten, so I had four hours to kill. With no particular plans in mind, I folded the futon, and put it in the closet.

I hadn't run in a while. I left the room, locking the door behind me – but you didn't need to be Aikawa to open a lock like this, and I had nothing inside worth stealing.

I ran down Imadegawa, and turned when I saw Roushisha University up ahead. I headed back to my room, and changed out of my sweaty clothes. Not for the first time, I bitterly wondered why I'd chosen to go out running in weather this hot.

I then finished a book I had out from the library. When that was done, I still had time left, so I opened Kunagisa's envelope and read over the contents yet again.

"....."

The envelope contains copies of the internal police reports.

I preferred not knowing how Kunagisa had managed to obtain these. She could access anywhere electricity went, and she had a friend who seemed to know everything in the galaxy, and that was all I needed to know. It wasn't like I was often interested in police investigations anyway; it was only Tomoe's case that mattered, and only relevant documents in the envelope.



"...but yeah..."

I flipped through the pages again.

"....."

There was no new information here. There were lots of details, but none of them particularly important; the main gist was exactly as Sasaki had said. This was absolutely not worth getting tortured by Aikawa over.

But it wasn't a total loss.

There were facts I had not known, that I should have known.

"....first, the alibis."

Obviously enough, suspicion had been directed at the four classmates who had been with Emoto Tomoe the night she was murdered. But all four of us had an alibi. Miiko provided mine and Mikoko's, while Muimi and Akiharu provided alibis for each other. I'd thought they might suspect Muimi and Akiharu of working together, but the police did not agree. From what Sasaki had told me, I'd assumed Muimi and Akiharu went to karaoke together, just the two of them – in fact, there had been a number of other students from our college with them. Their alibi was at least as good as ours. From that perspective, mine was actually the weakest; after all, Miiko had only confirmed it through the apartment walls.

But of course, I knew I wasn't the killer.

"Okay."

Next, the contents of her room. When Zerozaki and I broke in, I'd decided that it looked like nothing was missing, but this was apparently wrong. There was a list of everything in Tomoe's room, from the furniture to her jewelry. Privacy was not a right you had after death. Reading a list this detailed gave me the illusion of understanding who Emoto Tomoe was.

But.

The list did not contain the Akiharu's birthday present, the lanyard with the capsule on the end.

I had watched him give it to her. Its absence was puzzling.

The only explanation I could come up with was that the killer had taken it with them. But that only led to a new question – why would they do that?

"It didn't *look* valuable..."

The phone that had called me was found in Tomoe's pocket. They'd verified the phone records and everything.

There were no extra items on the scene. The killer had taken the thin cloth they used to strangle her.

"Cloth...thin cloth. Hmm..."

Next, the stuff I hadn't been able to get Mikoko to tell me. Her account of how she'd found the body was recorded here in scrupulous detail. She'd visited the apartment early in the morning, and rang Tomoe's room. There was no answer. She didn't answer the phone. Mikoko thought that was strange, and when a resident left the building, she slipped in through the security door, and went to Tomoe's room. Her door was not locked. There was no locked room mystery to complicate things here.

"And finally..."

The X/Y note.

The police had determined that it was left by the killer. Of course. Sasaki had said that Emoto Tomoe had died instantly, so there was obviously no way she could have left a dying message. That was something I had noticed myself. But that still left the question of why the killer had left a message. Leaving a signature at the scene was usually reserved for the likes of Jack the Ripper.

"...and that's it."

That was the end of the useful information. None of it really changed the gist of my current ideas about the case.

And that was fine.

The information had helped to eliminate a number of minor possibilities. I believed in keeping all possibilities in mind as long as they were still possible. But by this point, the main thrust of my thinking was pretty dang firm.

"...still..."

I wondered what the hell I was doing.  
Why did I have to do this?  
For Tomoe?  
Or for Mikoko?  
Obtaining documents like these...  
Wasting my time...  
And for what?  
"...I'd like to talk to Sasaki again."

I had things to ask her. Slight possibilities I'd like to eliminate. I would not call my ideas deductions until they were 100% locked in place.

I put the documents back in the envelope, then tore it up, and threw it in the trash. I did not want anyone else seeing that, I'd read them so many times there was nothing more I could gain from them.

So.  
An hour till Mikoko got here.  
Possibly two, given her habitual lateness.  
I decided to lie down and think some more.  
About this case?  
No.  
About how comically sad I was.  
I had plenty of time for that.  
My entire life.  
Every minute of it.

## 2

Mikoko showed up on time.

"I'm not late today!" she said, happily. Then she gave me a German salute with both hands. Her synapses were even more fried than usual, leaving her exceptionally wound up. She was wearing a tight tank top, and large, baggy overall shorts. And she had a yellow hat on – I hate to say it looked like the kind kindergarten kids wear, but it sort of did. The red hair peeping out from under the droopy brim was certainly cute, but her tank top was a little too small, like

she wear wearing nothing under her overalls, which was, well...not exactly objectionable or anything.

"Shall we go?"

I tried to step out of the room, but Mikoko said, "Oh, wait, wait," and pushed past me into the room. She'd done the same the last time she was here. Was forcing her way into people's homes a habit of hers? Society at large would not approve. "I brought something today. To thank you for coming with me."

She had a large Boston bag with her instead of her usual purse, and she took a bandana-wrapped bundle out of it. Inside was Tupperware.

"What's that?"

"Snacks!" she said, proudly, and opened the Tupperware.

Inside were six bite-sized sweet potatoes, worked up to resemble little Mon Blanc cakes. They were a little lopsided, and obviously homemade.

"I didn't know you could cook."

"A little! I dunno if they're any good."

"Mind if I try one?"

"Go ahead. Oh," and she took a thermos out of her back, handed me a cup, and filled it with the contents. Tea. Marco Polo tea. Well aware that my room contained nothing but tap water to drink, she had supplied beverages as well. Prepared for everything, this girl.

She poured herself a second cup, and then grinned at me. "Cheers," she said.

I tapped my cup against hers, and ate one of the sweet potatoes. Unbelievable sweetness spread through my mouth. Sweet was in the name, so sweetness was only natural, but there was a rather shocking amount of additional sugar added.

"...sweet," I said.

"Yeah, I love sweets."

"Hunh," I said, and ate another one. Also sweet. Come to think of it, I hadn't eaten anything yet today, so it was just as well

she'd brought something. Wait...hadn't Mikoko claimed she wasn't a fan of sweets? Maybe not. I couldn't remember.

...whatever.

Girls change their minds a lot, I guess.

We finished the sweet potatoes in five minutes flat.

"I didn't think you'd be such a good cook."

"I was a latchkey child."

"A...what?"

"Um, a child that was left home alone a lot. If both parents work, they give the kid a key and pack them off to school, right?"

"...why is that?"

"Um, because if nobody's home...they lock the doors, right?" Mikoko was starting to struggle. "So that's why they're called latchkey children."

"Oh. I understand."

I looked up at the ceiling, nodding to myself.

I see.

Some people grew up like that.

"Ii-kun? Did I saw something wrong?"

"Mm? What makes you think that?"

"Your expression is something else."

She looked less worried than anxious. Almost frightened. "It's nothing," I said, shaking my head. It was nothing. This was nothing. "We should get going. Where'd you want to go, Mikoko?"

"Eh?"

"You wanted to go shopping, right? Shinkyogoku? Around Kyoto Station? Or maybe Osaka?"

"Uh, um, um..." Mikoko stammered, as if she had given it no thought at all. She looked around the room for help. At last she looked at me, and said, "Anywhere is fine."

That made no sense at all.

"There has to be somewhere. It's your shopping."

"You don't have anywhere you'd like to go with me?"

"There's nothing I really want. I mean, my room is so small

if I bought something I'd have to throw it away soon. It's not practical. Practicality isn't all that important, but I don't really have anything I need or want to buy. What do you want to buy?"

"I dunno, clothes? Stuff."

"Hunh."

"And I'd like to get something to eat."

"Then Kawaramachi's our best bet."

"Okay," she said. I'm not the most opinionated guy around, but it was possible she was even worse. Why on earth would I have to decide where she wanted to shop? But there was no point in complaining.

"Let's go," I said.

We left the room, and walked to the bus stop at Senbon Nakadachiuri. The bus to Shijo Kawaramachi came five minutes later – a number 46. We were lucky enough to find two open seats next to each other; I took the window seat, and Mikoko sat next to me.

"You took your Vespa here?"

"Yes. My Vespa," she said, nervously. I guess me yelling at her had been effective. Maybe I'd been a little too harsh on her. I sometimes had difficulty controlling my emotions.

Okay, frequently.

"So we'll have to come back for it."

"Not a problem! Bus fare never changes. One price for the whole city!"

"True enough."

"You don't have a car or a moped or anything?"

"No, don't really need one."

"Hunh," she nodded, absently. "Tomo said the same thing. She had a license, but nothing to use it on. Just had it as an ID."

"Pretty much what I use it for."

"Mm...maybe that's what everyone does. But I want to drive something once I get mine."

Oh, right, she was taking driving lessons. I felt like she'd

said something about her parents getting her a car if she got her license.

"I do drive sometimes. I borrow Miiko's car."

"Hunh..."

Mikoko looked annoyed at the mention of Miiko's name. Even I was successfully learning not to mention her to Mikoko.

"I didn't know Tomoe had a license."

"Yeah, she did."

"I see. By the way, Mikoko, did you go to school the last couple of days?"

"Yeah, but I didn't run into you anywhere."

This was because I had not gone to school the last two days.

I had a lot of thinking to do after reading Kunagisa's dossier. I might be a college student, but while that was an important part of me, it wasn't a particularly important part.

"I talked to Akiharu and Muimi. They were talking about having some sort of wake for Tomoe. I hope you'll come too."

I hesitated for a moment – a very small moment, then said, "Just tell me when."

Whether that was an agreement, or simply an evasion, I wasn't sure. Given my personality, it was almost certainly the latter, but in this case, it might have been the former.

We got off the bus at Shijo Kawaramachi.

"Okay, today is gonna be FUN!" Mikoko announced, throwing both arms into the air. She gave me a smile free of all shackles, the single most appealing smile I had ever seen.

"No more depression! Nothing but fun today, right, Ii-kun?"

"...yeah, sounds good."

"Good! Mikoko full throttle!"

For the next six hours.

Mikoko hit every last shop on Shinkyogoku as if she had completely forgotten Tomoe.

Bouncing from store to store.

Bounding from display to display.

Beaming from register to register.  
Basking in the noise and commotion.  
Bustling through the crowds and merchandise.  
Like she'd gone quite mad.  
Like she'd broken inside.  
Like something in her had snapped.  
Like something in her had melted.  
Swooping.  
Soaring.  
Spiraling.  
Like she was scrabbling.  
Like she was floundering.  
A self-destructive hurtle.  
She was like a fairy.  
Like a newborn child.  
Like an innocent girl.  
Like a being of such purity...  
Such honest emotion.  
Laughter.  
Anger.  
And even a little sadness.  
All gave way to smiles again.  
Being with her...  
It was like...  
Even a defective product like me...  
"....."

Or perhaps she had already made up her mind. That might be nonsense on my part, an excuse for being unable to save her...for making *no effort* to save her, but I still think it might be true.

That Aoi Mikoko had accepted her fate.

"Oh my god, the time! That just FLEW by, didn't it?"

"Einstein once said a minute spent talking to a cute girl and a minute spent with your hand on a hot stove were as different as two things can be," I said, like Einstein was an old friend of mine.



"Mm?" Mikoko said, looking me in the eye, like she'd just cut off a demon's head. "Does that mean you think I'm cute?"

"I won't deny it."

It was best to play along with things like this. If I gave a real answer, I'd end up being forced into more than I bargained for. I'd learned that lesson today.

I had three paper bags in my right hand, two in my left, and two plastic bags hanging on my back. They contained nothing but clothes, so they weren't particularly heavy, but watching Mikoko throw out 10,000 yen bill after 10,000 yen bill was horrifying. Kunagisa was quite the shop-a-holic as well, but she did all her shopping online, at home. Seeing it go down right in front of me was a new kind of horror.

"So...what say we get something to eat before we go home?"

"Sounds good! Oh my god!"

"What?"

"You asked me to do something! I'm so happy!"

She beamed at me.

She was *really* wound up today.

What could possibly make anyone that happy?

We went to a shop on Kiyamachi that was half-bar, half-cafe. The interior design was made to look like a prison, and the staff were all dressed like prisoners and police. A strange shop, but the prices and food were perfectly fine. I'd come where with Miiko, and we'd agreed the shop was instantly on our Top Three list, but I figured I'd better not mention that to Mikoko. Aikawa only went to izakeyas (and ones that served only sake), and Kunagisa only ate junk food, and everyone else I knew was equally odd. Having people you could take to a shop like this was a very good thing.

The (fake) police woman led us to our cell, and we sat at the table inside.

"Can I get you started with some drinks?" she asked.

Mikoko ordered a cocktail, and I order Oolong Tea.

"You definitely don't drink, do you?"

"It's a rule. Same as Muimi's thing about not smoking in front of people."

"Oh, right. It was Tomo told her not to do that. She almost never demanded anything of her friends, so Muimi didn't protest at all."

"That explains it...she didn't seem like the type to worry about what people thought, otherwise."

"Actually, Muimi said she's going to quit smoke for good."

"...really?"

"Much healthier!" she said, as if brushing all the gloom aside. Our drinks arrived. They put the cocktail in front of me, and the tea in front of Mikoko. We ignored this, and ordered food.

"Muimi said you've known each other since elementary school?"

"Yeah. She started smoking back then."

"Didn't stunt her growth."

"She'd have been a giant if she hadn't smoked!"

What a horrifying thought.

"She was quite a bully. We only rehabilitated her in high school."

"A bit late, really."

"She met Tomo, and well. A lot happened."

A lot.

I suppose there was.

They'd known each other long enough.

"...what about you?"

"Hmm?"

"From what you've told me, it sounds like Tomoe was a big influence on Muimi. Did she do the same with you? Or Akiharu?"

"....."

Mikoko did not respond at first. At last she sighed.

"I thought relationships were built on time," she said. "I thought if you spent a long time together, you would finally start to understand each other. But I was wrong. Totally wrong, Ii-kun."

There are people you're drawn to even though you don't understand them, even though you've barely met them."

"Mikoko...why do you think Tomoe was murdered?"

"...I don't...I don't know!" she said, staring at her hands. "There was no reason for her to die. Not one reason for anybody to kill her."

"I think people usually kill other people for a very simple reason," I said, almost ignoring her. "They're in the way. The person they kill is preventing them from living the way they want, and they need to get rid of them to move forward. Very simple. Same way a penny on a train track gets flattened."

"...but Tomo wasn't..."

"Yes, Tomoe was very careful not to get too close to people. You think that makes it hard for her to become an obstacle to anyone else. She was never close enough to get in anyone's way."

"Right."

"You could also say she was never close enough to anyone for them to hate her, or see her as an enemy. If that was true, then nobody would have killed her. Her living would never have been a problem for anyone else."

Just you  
being alive

is a problem for the rest of us.

"But this isn't as easy as it sounds. Tomoe wasn't exactly a hermit leaving in the woods out by Mt. Fuji. She went to school – to college – and lived a life like any other student. Inevitably, she formed relationships with those around her. So here's the question, Mikoko. Tell me what you really think. How do you form relationships with other people?"

"Um," Mikoko said, thrown, but trying to answer. "I don't really know. Don't you just...get along with people?"

"Yeah. More or less, exactly that, Mikoko. Put another way...you choose someone. But let's think about that a bit. Choosing one person means there's someone else you *don't* choose.

The act of choosing always has that opposite side. Like a coin reflected in a mirror. I don't mean on a base level you can only have one best friend, you can only have one lover. That's not what I mean at all. I mean there simply isn't any way for anybody to be liked by everyone, to get along with everyone."

"Really...? I know it's not easy; it's really hard to get everyone to like you, but I don't...think it's impossible. Maybe not everyone in the world, but at least by the people around you. I think that much is possible."

"I don't think it is. I believe it isn't. The world is not as full of nice people as you think it is, Mikoko. There are psycho killers that see others as something to cut apart, girls with blue hair who see everyone as a sequence of ones and zeros, and consultants that scoff at everything in the world. Fortune tellers that know every hope and despair in the world, and keep on grinning, artists that view others and their own existence as a momentary style choice. And people who can only see good will as bad."

"....."

"I think Tomoe knew that, which is *why* she chose not to get too close to anyone. The best way to avoid getting a lot of enemies is to avoid making a lot of friends."

"Tomo wasn't..." like that, Mikoko said, but she only mouthed the last two words. She couldn't find it in her to deny it aloud. "But even if you're right, Ii-kun, even if you're right, she was still murdered anyway."

"She was. Tomoe did her best not to get too close to anyone, and she did her best not to let anyone know that."

That, I couldn't do.

I didn't even try.

"But she was murdered anyway. Someone murdered Tomoe. So if you'll indulge me a moment, Mikoko, compare this to the serial killer everyone's talking about. He kills indiscriminately. Anyone he sets his eyes on, maybe even someone he didn't set his eye on but just happened to bump shoulders with, or even someone

he *didn't* bump shoulders with – anything can be a reason. He kills liked a machine. Automatically. He would have reason enough to kill Tomoe, or even me."

"...so the slasher...killed her...?"

"Doesn't sound like it. Sasaki...the police say she definitely wasn't killed by the slasher. Okay, I'm going to change the subject here, Mikoko. Have you ever thought there were too many people?"

I knew this came out of the blue, so I sat and waited for her to answer.

"But that's no reason to kill them," Mikoko said, at last. "Can you forgive a murderer, Ii-kun?"

"I can't," I said. "It's not even a matter of forgiving or not forgiving. It doesn't even get to that stage. There's nothing worse than a murderer. Nothing. The urge to kill another human being is the worst thing a human can feel. Desiring the death of another, praying for it – that's beyond all help. It's a sin you can never repay. No apologize, no subsequent good deeds, nothing can ever make it better. There will never be a moment when they can ask for forgiveness."

My voice was so cold.

I could scarcely believe it was my own.

What nonsense.

Who was it that was beyond all help here?

"People who have murdered someone all deserve a one way ticket to hell."

"B-but," Mikoko gulped, shuddering, but forced herself to argue. "What if you were in danger? Imagine you were walking alone in Kamogawa Park at night. And then the serial killer came at you with a knife. Would you just let him kill you?"

"No, I'd fight."

"Of course!"

"Of course. And maybe I'd gain the upper hand and accidentally kill him in the heat of the moment. Could happen to anyone. But then it would dawn on me. I'd realize I killed someone

else so that I might live. I'd know how grave my sin was. I'd be aware that what I had done could never be forgiven, even in death."

"But...but he would have killed you? It's only natural to try and survive."

"It is natural, and yet, still evil. Let me make this clear," I said. "I am capable of killing."

"....."

"I could absolutely kill someone – for my own benefit, or for the benefit of someone else. I could kill a friend, or a family member. Why do you think?"

"...why? I don't know!" she said, anxiously. "I don't think you're right. You're a nice guy, Ii-kun. You couldn't do something like that."

"I could. I know I could. Because I can't begin to understand the pain others feel."

"....."

"A girl I know has most of her emotions just...missing. She always seems to be having a great time, but that's only because she doesn't have any other emotions. So she doesn't quite understand when people are sad, or angry."

She only had one way of understanding.

She did not distinguish between Eden and what came after.

"I'm the same way. I'm worse, actually. I don't understand other people's pain. Why? Because I don't process emotions like pain and suffering in a normal manner. I don't even object to dying. I don't want to die, but neither do I have any real aversion to the idea. That's the way I am, Mikoko."

"....."

"Different things keep different people from killing others. The biggest reason is that you know it would hurt. You feel sorry for them. You know what I mean, right? I'm sure you've wanted to hit people before...but decided not to."

"...yeah, I've never really hit anyone."

"But you wanted to."

She didn't answer, but that proved I was right. This was not a sin. Even in Heaven, people would want to hurt each other sometimes.

"It's a matter of recognizing your emotions in others. Sympathy, empathy...words like that. This isn't always good. Jealousy, envy, and hatred all function the same way. Understanding how others feel has its good side, and its bad side."

Understanding everything other people felt just led to you being as broken as that woman on that island.

"I'll spare you the philosophical debate about the relative merits. My point is, I don't have any of that to stop me. I don't understand how other people feel. I have to stop myself anyway. That can really hurt sometimes. It's not easy. But I've kept that monster at bay."

You've got a lot of nerve living...

...with a monster like that inside you.

"...Ii-kun."

"It's amazing I haven't lost control already. But that's exactly why I can't forgive a murderer. How could I? Their very existence is deplorable. Despicable. I hate them from the bottom of my heart. More than anything. All murderers should be destroyed."

"....."

"I'm lying. I don't think anything like that."

Our food arrived.

Mikoko ordered another cocktail.

I ordered water.

We ate in silence for a while.

"...Ii-kun."

"...what?"

"Why are we talking about this?"

After...

...the rest of the day have been so fun.

I shook my head.

I'm sure that was unspeakably cruel.

"I thought you'd want to know, Mikoko. Would you rather not? I think you'd rather know."

"....."

"And I wanted you to know. That I'm a defective product."

"Defective product? That's awful. Especially talking about yourself."

"I know better than anyone. Defective product, human failure, call me what you will. People say it all the time. Even in my limited contact with other people, I know. 'He's not normal.' 'Unnatural.' 'Weird.' 'Freaky.' 'Fucked up.' They're all right."

"It sounds like..." Mikoko said, anxiously. "You might kill yourself."

"I won't do that. I promised."

"....promised?"

"To the first person I killed."

I let that hang.

And ate a piece of steak.

"I'm lying," I said. "My life has not been that dramatic. And I'm not romantic enough to make such a beautiful promise. I'm an ordinary man...just one missing something important. I won't kill myself, but...only because it's sort of lame. Like I ran away from my own flaws. Of course, I'm doing that now, but I don't want it to look like I am."

"I knew you weren't like other people, li-kun. But I would cry if you killed yourself. I know I would. Defective or whatever, you can do something about it. You're living like normal people, aren't you?"

"Broken things can be fixed, but defective things can't."

"God," Mikoko sighed. "I feel like I'm talking to Tomo."

"Mm? Did Tomoe talk like this?"

"No, not really. She didn't get that close. But if I had ever *really* talked to her, I feel like she'd have talked like this."

"In that case..."

In that case, it really was a shame.



I really should have talked to Emoto Tomoe more.

If I had.../...if I had?

If I had, then what?

Did I think it would have helped me? Did I think it would have helped her?

I mean...

What little she did say what was got her...

"I don't think Tomoe hates the killer," I said, not looking at Mikoko. "I don't think she feels anything like that."

"...why do you think that?"

"Just a hunch. No other reason. A boring old hunch. But I think I'm right. She isn't the type of girl to hate anyone."

I deliberately used the present tense.

Not the past.

"And...she was strangled from behind, so she never saw her killer's face. She couldn't hate them if she wanted to."

"The killer's...face..." Mikoko echoed. "The person who killed Tomo..."

"But I don't think Tomoe would have wanted to know. It wouldn't have mattered to her who killed her. That's how murder works. No matter who killed her, she's still dead. And Tomoe was no more averse to dying than I am. I think I can say that with some confidence. Tomoe did not seem to like herself that much. She told me...she said she wanted to be you in her next life, Mikoko."

When she heard that...

Mikoko...

...almost burst into tears.

She just managed to hold them off, whispering, "Tomo...Tomo...Tomo..."

I watched this without emotion.

Watched without feeling a single thing.

"Who do you think the killer is, Mikoko?"

"...you keep asking that," Mikoko said, frowning. "Are you investigating the case or something?"

"I am."

I admitted as much.

"At least, I want to know. I'd like to meet the killer. And ask them."

"Can you forgive yourself?"

"Ii-kun," Mikoko said, incredibly sad. "I'm scared. I'm so scared. You're scary."

"Am I? I don't think I am, but perhaps I'm wrong."

"You apply your own rules to everyone else. How can I put this? You think you're just a small part of the world, but you think everyone else is just another gear in that world. No, not a gear, because if a gear was missing, the whole thing would stop, and you don't care if a few other people disappear."

"I wouldn't say that."

"I still don't think you could just kill someone. But I think you wouldn't hesitate to tell someone to die."

"....."

"That's what you're doing, isn't it? That's what asking that question to Tomo's killer means. It's like telling them they have no right to live. It's mean. It's so cruel. Do you know that, Ii-kun?"

"I do," I said. "And I'd say it anyway. I know the depths of my own sins and nonsense like I've already fallen into hell. Someone told me that most killers get carried away, caught up in emotion, but I can kill deliberately. I can kill with no self-deception, no self-denial, no self-satisfaction, and no self-approval. There are few people worse than me."

"You're pretty down on yourself."

"I'm a masochist," I said. "And a really bad one. But that's the way I work. My motto. My style. I've no plans to stop."

"I know," Mikoko said.

She looked a little...

...sad.

Like looking at someone far away.  
Someone already gone.  
A forlorn...  
...wistful gaze.  
Her expression.  
Her mood.  
Nothing hidden.  
She didn't try to hide.  
I knew what she felt.  
I understood it.  
An illusion.  
A trick of the mind that almost convinced me...  
I knew how someone else felt.  
"But that's why..."  
It was like...  
A gentle feeling.  
A tender moment.  
Emotional words.  
They slipped out.  
With no weight.  
No urgency.  
Yet they carried an impossibility.  
That could not be ignored.  
A raging nightmare.  
The world itself twisting and shattering.  
Intruding desire.  
The pleasure of a beating.  
The joy of a stabbing.  
The ecstasy of being cut apart.  
Chopped into pieces.  
Everything that mattered torn away.  
Heart snatched out.  
Mind invaded.  
By a smile.

"That's why I love you, Ii-kun."

### 3

Someone was crouched outside my apartment like a biker moll. Wondering who it could be, I came closer, and was not particularly surprised to find it was Aikawa. I'd seen her as recently as Wednesday, but she must have visited a salon, because her hair was different. Her bangs were chopped off right above the brows, a very trendy cut. With her outstanding figure, she looked even more like a professional model. The effect was largely ruined by her angry punk rocker posture.

When she saw me, she said, "Yo!" and stood up.

She was smiling like a cat.

"Enjoy your date, Ii-kun?"

"You saw me?"

"Turning into Shinkyogoku. Figured I'd wait to make fun of you here."

"...did you."

She had nothing better to do? I shook my head. She certainly was...unpredictable. I could never work out what she might do. Like a living jack-in-the-box.

"You cut your hair? Time for a new look?"

"Someone cut it for me," she said, toying with the edge.

"...that is the usual way."

"In this case, it was a survival knife, like so. If I'd dodged a moment later I'd have lost an eye. I don't mind admitting that one spooked me."

"....."

The worst hair dresser ever.

"I'm considering going out on a limb and getting it all cut real short. What do you think? Would that look good on me?"

"You'd look good in any hair style, Aikawa. You're good-looking."

"Now, aren't you handy with a compliment! But how many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?"

She put me in a headlock, rubbing her knuckles into my skull. Then she let me go.

And gave me a sinister smile.

I couldn't hate her.

She'd kill me for it.

"So? How'd it go? Your date, I mean. Where's that little girl you were with? Mm? Mm? You can tell me everything. Any advice I give is free of charge."

"Let me just correct this misunderstanding – she's a key figure in this case."

".....oh? Oh, really? Then...that was Aoi Mikoko?"

I nodded. She looked grim.

"Oh. Well, either way, if you're back here already, things didn't go well."

It was around eleven.

Mikoko had ordered drink after drink, and was soon thoroughly drunk. She'd fallen asleep in the shop. I'd carried her back to Horikawa Oike, into her room, put her on her bed, and locked the door behind me. Then I'd taken the bus back home. Mikoko would not wake up again tonight, I was sure.

"Such a shame, boyo. Want me to make it better?"

Aikawa clearly found all this richly amusing.

"Like I said, we don't have that kind of relationship. Anyway," I said, before this got any worse. "The hair dresser who provided your new hairstyle...was Zerozaki, I take it?"

"....."

If anything, Aikawa...

...looked even happier.

"He's a hell of a kid. Only a second rate psycho killer, but he's first rate with those knives. He understands instinctively how to move every muscle to put out the maximum speed the human body is capable of. I mean, look," Aikawa rolled up her sleeve.

There was a white bandage wrapped around her arm. Red dots were seeping through it. "And he's nearly uninjured! That kid's *good*. He definitely lives up to the Zerozaki name."

"Zerozaki's stronger than you, Jun?"

"Not a matter of strong or weak. I definitely have the advantage in raw power. I'll admit his speed is nothing to be trifled with, but he's a long way from being able to go up against me."

Aikawa the narcissist.

Always overflowing with confidence.

"But, if all he tries to do is run away...pretty sound judgment on his part. I figured a psycho killer would be a little more impulsive, but he kept his wits about him. You were right."

"About what?"

"He is like you. Nothing in particular is the same, and yet, somewhere underneath..." Aikawa turned sarcasm up to full throttle. "An uber-masochist, and an uber-sadist. What a lovely couple you make."

"So, what you're telling me is," I said, picking my words carefully. "You found Zerozaki...and let him get away?"

"Whaaat?" Aikawa gave me a terrifying smile, and twisted both my cheeks. "Did you just say something? What was that? Aikawa Jun is all bark and no bite?"

"I didn't say that! You're more of a cat anyway..."

Ouch.

I had no idea the human cheek contained that many nerves.

"Fair enough," she said, letting go. She scratched her head, looking bored. "You're on the money. I clearly have my work cut out for me. Think his tattooed face is still hanging around Kyoto?"

"If I was Zerozaki, I would definitely have left."

"Yeah," Aikawa said, disgruntled. "What a pain. I'm not letting him get away, you know."

The cruel gleam in her eyes left me feeling very sorry for Zerozaki. She wasn't one to give up. Ever.

"I'd better get going," she said, stretching. I didn't see her

Cobra anywhere, so she must have come on foot. "Not that I ever came in, but same difference. Good night. Sweet dreams. For both of us."

"Can I ask one thing, Jun?" I called after her.

She looked over her shoulder. "What?"

"Can you forgive a murderer?"

".....hunh? What's that? Some sort of metaphor?"

"Um, I mean...put as simply as possible, do you think it's ever okay to kill someone?"

"I do," she said.

No hesitation. No wishing or washing.

"If someone deserves to die, then they oughta be killed."

She cackled. "But you just try and kill me. Don't worry. It won't affect the world at all."

She waved a hand airily, and was gone.

"....."

Wow.

That rage...

That sarcasm...

How much better.

"I'm really..."

Half-assed.

I astonished myself sometimes.

By astonished, I mean disgusted.

"But it's nonsense either way, Aikawa."

I went into the building. I reached my room without seeing anyone. I reached into my pocket for the key, and found something unexpected. I took it out.

The key to Mikoko's room.

"....."

I'd had to search her bag for it to open her door. And I couldn't just leave the door unlocked, so I'd borrowed the key, and locked it on my way out. I'd planned to drop it in her mailbox or something, but her Vespa key was on the same keyring, so I'd taken

it home with me. I'd bring it and the Vespa back in the morning. It wasn't that I just wanted to ride the Vespa. I swear.

"And the Vespa key's not the only thing I need to bring her."

Even a dense, thick-headed, clueless buffoon like me could not ignore something right in front of his face.

Aoii Mikoko.

"....I remember now, Mikoko."

I went in my room, and laid on the floor, not even bothering to put the futon out.

My first day back at school after the crazy island trip, while I was still clueless as to how Japanese colleges worked, the first person who spoke to me was Mikoko.

"Hey there! If you're confused about anything, feel free to ask me!"

With a big smile.

Thoughtfulness...

...to a student starting late.

I thought she was...

...incredibly annoying.

But I was also a little grateful.

Her bright, outgoing personality...

...reminded me of a good friend.

"....that really is a masterpiece," I said, like Zerozaki Hitoshiki would.

I closed my eyes.

I didn't think about tomorrow.

I didn't think about the case.

I didn't think about the slasher.

I didn't think about the consultant or my one and only friend.

I didn't want to think about anything at all.



Aoi Mikoko  
Classmate

## Chapter 6: The End of (All) Things

**Please, don't expect anything more from me.**

"I'll come by tomorrow. Around noon. To settle this."

That was the note I'd left on the table in Mikoko's room. It was a ten minute Vespa ride to Horikawa Oike, so I had plenty of time.

I woke at eight. I went jogging to kill the time, and regretted it. Miiko invited me to breakfast, so I ate in her room. It went beyond Japanese food – she prepared vegetarian food fit for a Buddhist monk, so it didn't actually *taste* like anything, but there was plenty of it, and I did not leave full.

"I'm off to work," she said, and left around ten.

I went back to my room, and killed more time. I tried playing more eight queens, but my brain wasn't working properly, and I gave up at five. I switched to missionaries and cannibals, but got bored again. If I had a computer I could play a game or something. Maybe I should get Kunagisa to give me one...but I didn't want to clutter up the room just to kill time, so maybe it wasn't a good idea. And if I had time to kill, it didn't matter if I killed it or not. Like I'd told Mikoko, I had nothing against boredom. I was used to waiting.

"....."

As ignorant children do, I had read *The Little Prince* when I was very young.

I didn't understand it at all.

Everyone said, "You'll understand it when you're grown up."

Recently I remembered this, and read it again.

I didn't understand it at all.

"Zerozaki's no longer in Kyoto...I can't contact Aikawa myself...Kunagisa never leaves her house..."

I didn't know a single normal person. Of course, I'd never really wanted to know one.

But sometimes...

I wondered if I only thought I was living alone, isolating myself, when I was actually being kept inside a cage.

"Pointless."

I was only one character in the world's cast, with no way of observing my position objectively. Especially someone like me, neither a main character, nor a supporting member; like Aikawa said, I was a plot contrivance. Explaining bits of a story happening somewhere that did not matter to the world at large.

But this...

...was such an obvious truth, admitting it did not even count as self-abuse.

"Maybe I should just go."

It was eleven. Very early, but there was nothing wrong with early. I left my apartment, and walked to the parking lot. I started the Vespa's vintage engine, and put the helmet on. I'd found it in Mikoko's room; it was a half-sized, fashionable looking thing. Not at all the kind of helmet I would have chosen, but it fit, so it would serve its function.

Vroom. I drove down Senbon, and turned east at Marutamachi. I turned south again when I reached Horikawa, and followed that road.

The wind whipped comfortably around me.

For a brief moment...

...I forgot that I was alive.

As expected, it only took me ten minutes to reach Oike. I parked the Vespa in the basement garage of Mikoko's building, and switched the engine off. Then I left the garage, and circled round the front of the building.

"I wasted over an hour here last time..."

Not something I wanted to remember. But that was the kind of thing my memory never let me forget. At the least, I should use that shame to ensure I did not do the same thing again.

I went straight inside, not even breaking my stride. Waved a hand at the cameras, and stepped into the elevator.

At this point.

At this point, I had not thought of anything.

Not thought of any way to respond to what Mikoko had said.

Of how I should receive her affection.

I had not...

...thought about it at all.

"That's a lie."

I'd made up my mind a long time ago.

There was only one word I could say to her.

So there was no point in waffling.

If I thought about what kind of person I was, and what kind of girl Mikoko was, then the answer was as plain as any mathematic equation. Not that reality ever went as smoothly as simple numbers. It was like speculating about whether the final digit of pi was even or odd. Of course, I was still calculating the area of a triangle by dividing the height by two, so trying to discuss anything in terms of equations, formula, or mathematical operations was ludicrous.

Besides, no matter what I'd made my mind up to, I had a history of changing my mind at the last minute. You might as well say I hadn't thought about it.

I got off the elevator at the fourth floor, and walked down the hall.

Room 3.

"...right?"

I wasn't totally sure, but it *seemed* right.

Was Mikoko awake yet? She didn't seem like she had low blood pressure, but given how careless she was with time, I doubted she was the early to rise type.

I rang the doorbell.

"....."

There was no answer.

"....um."

I don't mean...

...that nobody answered the door.

I mean there was no response.

No sound from inside.

Nothing.

"....that's...odd."

I rang the bell again.

The same.

I sensed nothing from inside the room.

Fidget. Fidget. Fidget.

My heart beating faster.

My body functioning unnaturally.

"....."

I rang the bell again.

Two times, three times, four times.

I stopped counting after five.

I knew...

...something was wrong.

It was like a prophecy.

Like watching a predictable movie on endless loop.

Was that how that psychic had described it?

Like watching something through a monitor, unable to interfere.

I didn't want to understand what she meant, but I did now.

Aoi Mikoko.

My classmate.

Always happy...sometimes sad.

She'd said...

That she loved me.

My impressions of her.

A half-forgotten shadow.

A distant memory.

Something so close to me...  
I'd forgotten all about it.  
I no longer needed to remember.  
That evil...  
...horrible sight.

Death.

Nothingness.

"....., .....

"

I muttered something vile.  
Opened Mikoko's door.  
And...

Aoi Mikoko was dead.

## 2

This was awful. This was awful.  
I was standing in Mikoko's room.  
I could barely stand.  
I felt sick. Really sick. Really really sick.  
Sick. Sick. Sick.  
Sick. Sick. Sick.  
*Sick. Sick. Sick.*  
**Sick.**  
I clasped my chest.  
I almost threw up.  
Like I'd shoved something indigestible down my throat.  
I looked at the bed again.  
Mikoko was lying there.  
Asleep.

If you could call it sleep.  
Since her body no longer functioned.  
Her heart no longer beat.  
There were bruises...  
...left around her slender neck.  
Her eyes would never open again.  
I did not want to describe it any other way.

Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-bump. Ba-Bump. Ba-Bump. Sick.  
Dizzy. Head spinning. Spinning. Spinning. Spinning round and  
round. Something had gone mad. Crazy. Insane.

Was it me?

I...

was about...

to collapse.

My pulse racing.

It was hard to breathe.

It was hard to live.

I might be dying.

My eyes were burning up.

My heart was freezing cold.

"....."

I swallowed, trying to calm myself, but that was a mistake.  
It hurt. It hurt. It hurt so much.

"...Aoi Mikoko has been..."

I forced myself to say it.

Telling myself it was true.

"...has been murdered."

Thud.

I finally did fall over, landing on my ass.

I was used to death.

I was used to people close to me being murdered.

Death was a familiar thing for me.

And yet.

This hurt. The pain was too much.

I was suffering.

I would never forget this.

Never forget the sight that slapped my eyes as I stepped into the room, the sight of Mikoko as Death. I would never forget the sight of her body, no longer harboring any form of consciousness.

I managed to stop myself from passing out.

I looked at Mikoko's body again.

Lying on her back on her bed.

Face twisted in pain.

Face bloodshot and purple.

I knew her bright smile...

...so this was too cruel.

She wasn't wearing the overall shorts from yesterday.

She wore a sleeveless shirt, white as snow, and milky white shorts. Like she was dressed for death.

"....."

I recognized them.

She'd bought a lot of clothes the day before; these were among them.

The last thing she bought.

Mikoko tried them on, and asked, "Do I look good?"

I'd given evasive answers all afternoon.

But at last I broke down.

"You do," I said.

In these clothes.

When I'd brought her here, I had definitely not tried to change her clothes. I'd just placed her on the bed. So Mikoko must have woken up at some point, and changed.

And after that...

Why had she chosen this particular outfit?

Was she waiting for someone?

My imagination failed me.

And.



Next to her head.

In red letters.

X/Y.

The same formula written next to Tomoe.

Written here.

"...nonsense everywhere."

I took out my phone.

Punched in a number from memory.

She answered half-way through the first ring.

"Sasa."

"Hello..."

I was about to give my name, but before I did, Sasaki said, "Oh, you." She remembered me by my voice alone. Even though I'd only spoken to her once. In any other circumstances, I'd have been very impressed. "What is it? You remember something?"

Her voice was calm.

I found that irritating.

Unpleasant. Grating.

"...Sasaki, um...Aoi's..."

"What? I can't hear you. Speak up. What about Aoi?"

"Aoi's been...murdered."

"....." Her tone changed instantly. "Where are you?"

"Aoi's apartment."

"I'll be right there."

The line died abruptly, as if snuffed out. I stood with the phone against my ear for a while, my eyes staring at Mikoko.

"How..." I said, though she could not hear me.

Though it no longer meant a thing.

Though it was now completely pointless.

"How would I have answered you?"

Mikoko.

I still felt like I'd swallowed something indigestible. That didn't seem to plan on going away.

The police were there in less than ten minutes.

"Are you okay?" Sasaki said, supporting me. I must have looked really sick. She seemed genuinely worried.

"Are you okay?" she said, again. I couldn't find the words to answer. All I could manage to do was raise a hand. Sasaki nodded gravely. "Let's get you out of here. Come on."

Leaning on Sasaki's shoulder, I made it out into the hall. There were other police pouring in from the elevator. That's odd, Kazuhito wasn't here. Didn't he come? Or was he doing something else, somewhere else? Maybe so. Maybe not.

"Urp..." My stomach hurt. My chest hurt. My body hurt. "Ughhhh..."

I felt sick. So sick.

Full of sick.

Like something was thrashing around inside me trying to tear its way out of my chest, and that sensation was flooding through every blood vessel in my body. The heat, the heat, the heat.

It was driving me mad.

Sasaki took me out of the building and sat me in the back of her Toyota Crown. She sat in the driver's seat, then turned around to ask, "Feeling better?"

I shook my head.

"Okay," she looked me over appraisingly. "I thought you were the kind of guy who wouldn't bat an eye at a dead body. Even if it was a friend." Up till now her tone had been strictly professional, but a crack had appeared in that facade. "You're more fragile than I thought. You look half dead yourself."

"...I'll take that as a compli..."

I couldn't get the word out. I almost threw up, and had to clap my hands over my mouth. I couldn't throw up here, not in Sasaki's car. Somehow, I avoided it. I couldn't even banter.

"Hunh," Sasaki looked disappointed. "I expected more from Jun's favorite."

.....

Oh, that's right, Aikawa had said Sasaki was an old friend.

Being forced to rack my brains for that had been a welcome distraction. I was able to sit up, and lean back against the seat. I took a deep breath.

"...yeah, I'm weirdly delicate. Delicate, or precarious. Or maybe risky, I dunno."

"What are you talking about? You're not making sense."

".....um, just wait for the next time. The next time. This time wasn't normal. You can judge what kind of person I am the next time. This time is seriously rough."

I moaned, and closed my eyes.

Sasaki sat in silence for a moment. "At any rate," she said. "We've got to take a statement from you. So we'll need to take you down to the station. Think you can make it?"

"As long as you drive carefully, I think so."

"Okay. I'll try not to shake you around too much."

She turned forward, and started driving. Mikoko's apartment building was soon out of sight. I couldn't see the speedometer from where I sat, but it certainly didn't seem like she was driving carefully.

"...don't you need to be at the scene?"

"My job is more the mental side of things."

"Sounds like..." we might have that in common, but I didn't think I had much in common with her. "Um, Sasaki..."

"What?"

"How do you know Aikawa?"

"....." She was silent. I couldn't see her face. "...she helps with work sometimes. That's all. Do you watch police TV shows?"

"I'm aware of them."

"Well, you know how the police characters often have an underworld informant? That's kind of how it is with her. A business relationship."

A vague explanation. Rather, she had no intention of explaining. Not that I blamed her for being unable to describe the

red consultant.

"I don't mean it that specific. More abstract. From your perspective, what kind of person is Aikawa?"

"Do we really need to talk about that now?"

"It helps distract me." This was true. If I didn't focus on something else, my stomach would explode. "Please. Talk about something."

"So don't ask something hard to answer," she said. And thought about it a bit. "For example, would you believe me if I said I knew someone who'd survived a sawed off shotgun to the belly at point blank range? Or walked through a rain of rifle bullets without looking the least concerned? Or jumped off a burning forty-story building without suffering any injury? You wouldn't believe me, would you? Any stories I could tell about Jun make me sound like a liar. So it's hard to answer."

"....."

I knew only too well how Sasaki felt, so I elected not to press her further.

We reached the station in less than ten minutes. I followed Sasaki inside.

"It's just turned noon...time for lunch. You want anything?"

"Katsudon okay?"

"Sure. You pay for what you eat, of course."

Government power oversaw every detail. I waived my right to eat. I'd just throw it up if I ate now, anyway. I was very sure of that.

"Okay. Well, wait in that room there. I've got to report in, but I'll be with you in two minutes."

Sasaki pushed me into what looked like a tiny conference room, and walked off down the hall. At least it wasn't an interrogation room, I thought, and sat down.

I suddenly had a craving for a cigarette.

Even though I'd never smoked one.

Was that killing time?

Or escaping reality?

Or...

Just a suicidal urge?

Whatever it was, it was of equally little value to me.

A pointless waste of thought.

This was getting bad.

One more step...

And who I was...

My very nature...

Would give way to madness.

"Sorry to keep you," Sasaki said, coming in. There was a pink package in her hand. "Are you okay? You're looking worse. And sweating badly."

"...sorry, but where's the bathroom?"

"Down this hall to the right. It's a dead end, you can't miss it."

I thanked her, and ran for it.

Hand over my mouth.

Fighting the turmoil inside.

I found the bathroom as directed, and burst into a stall, vomiting up everything inside me.

A sound came from my throat so horrible I could hardly believe I was producing it myself.

A sour flavor lingered after.

I threw up some much it felt like I'd turned inside out. When I was breathing regularly again I stood up, and wiped my mouth with a handkerchief.

I flushed the toilet.

Whew.

I went to the sink and washed my face. I scooped some water up in my palm, and rinsed my mouth. I looked at myself in the mirror. I did look like I was on the brink of death. But I definitely felt much better than I did a few minutes ago.

"...okay."

That was that. I left the bathroom, and went back down the hall to where Sasaki was waiting.

"All better?" she asked.

"Yeah. Threw up, felt better."

"Okay. This," she said, showing me the pink bundle, "Is my lunch. Want any?"

"...you sure?"

"I won't charge you, don't worry."

She took a seat opposite me. I went ahead and ate her lunch. It was an ordinary lunch, but my stomach was empty, and it tasted really good.

Sasaki waited for me to finish eating before saying anything.

"So," she said. "What happened?"

"That's what I want to know."

"....." She didn't seem to like that turn of phrase, and glared at me. I avoided her gaze. "Just the facts, as simple as you can."

"Um. I'll have to start yesterday, so it might take a while."

"Go ahead. Until this case is solved, my time is yours."

She smiled. But her eyes did not. Which was scary. I stopped beating around the bush and settled down to business.

"I went out with Aoi yesterday. Around Shinkyogoku. She drank a little too much towards the end."

"Okay. And then?"

Her eyes were looking for any chinks in my armor. She wasn't planning on scolding me about the underage drinking, was she? I couldn't be too sure.

"So I wound up taking her home. I took the key from her purse, and put her on the bed. Then I took the bus back home." Meeting Aikawa was not critical to my story, so I left that part out. "Then I went to sleep."

"You locked her door?"

"I did. Aoi's Vespa was parked at my apartment, so I

planned to bring that and her keys back tomorrow...today. An hour ago I rode her Vespa to her apartment. When I opened the door, I found her lying there."

"Hmm. The door was locked?"

"Hunh?"

I looked up, as if surprised. I then made a show of thinking, and was silent for a good five seconds.

"...no, it wasn't. I don't remember using the key."

"...I see."

Sasaki didn't seem entirely convinced, but she nodded anyway.

"There are lots of security cameras in that building. I think it will show that I'm telling the truth."

"Yes, we've already contacted the security company," she said, calmly. "Just in case, let me ask this...did you touch anything at the scene?"

"No, although I'm a little embarrassed to admit I didn't even have it in me to run over to her."

"You made the right decision."

Sasaki closed her eyes, thinking.

She'd said thinking was her job. I'd learned that much when she'd visited my apartment the first time. I would not forget how thoroughly she'd defeated me that time.

"Since I didn't touch Aoi, I don't even...was she really dead?"

"Yes, I'm afraid she was. She'd been dead for two or three hours, although we're waiting for the coroner to confirm the time of death. It was probably around nine or ten this morning."

"This might not matter, but..."

"Go ahead. *Everything* matters."

That was a line I would want to use myself someday, but I doubted I would ever have the chance.

"When I put her on the bed last night, Aoi was wearing overall shorts. But she wasn't wearing them today. I think she must

have woken up at some point this morning, or last night, and changed clothes. Since I locked the door last night, it's possible she let the killer in."

"I see."

"And the clothes she's wearing now...she bought those yesterday."

Sasaki nodded. I realized she hadn't been taking notes. Last time she had also listened intently, without writing anything down.

"You have a good memory?"

"Hunh? Well, pretty good, yes."

It wasn't something she took any real pride in, or that particularly mattered to her once I pointed out. That just made me even more jealous.

"Um, also, between the hours of nine and ten, I was eating breakfast with my next door neighbor, so I suppose I do have an alibi."

"Fine," she said, clearly not interested. In fact, it seemed like she was busy thinking about something else entirely, something that was much more important than my silly alibi. "When you called it in, I thought you'd killed her."

"....." I gaped at her. "That's...blunt of you."

"I'm sure it must come as a shock, but that is what I thought. I won't hide it. I thought you'd killed her and were trying to hide that by being the one to find her. But you seem to be genuinely sick. And even if we leave out the time of death, the thin cloth used as a murder weapon was not found at the scene, so it wasn't physically possible for you to have murdered her."

"....."

"Unless you've got the cloth hidden on your person."

"Want to check?"

"No."

Sasaki did not say that out of professional negligence; she said it because she'd already checked before taking me out of Mikoko's apartment. She searched me while I was feeling sick and



leaning on her shoulder.

Kindness hid much.

I sort of admired that.

"Okay."

"The cameras and the official time of death will make you an even less viable candidate. But in that case..."

Sasaki leaned back in her seat, staring at me.

And asked the question.

"Who killed her?"

The same question I'd asked her twice the last time we met.

"I don't know."

"You don't have any idea?"

"No," I answered, readily. "I wasn't even that close to Aoi. It was only a week ago I started spending any real time with her."

"I apologize for the personal question," Sasaki said, "But were you and Aoi romantically involved?"

"The answer is no. No, and only no. Thinking back on it, I'm not even sure we were friends."

"Oh...yes, come to think of it, that was something Jun mentioned when she described you."

At least this made sense to her.

"Aikawa? What did Aikawa say about me?"

"I won't repeat it."

The way she said that made me even more curious, but I realized that might be exactly what she intended, so I carefully decided not to press her further. I had a pretty good idea what Aikawa would say about me anyway.

Sasaki had a number of other details to ask me about, and when those were done, she said, "Okay. Unless you have any questions for me?"

"No, not this time," I said, after pretending to think about it. "Honestly, I'd rather go home and rest."

"Okay, then we're done for today. I'll drive you home."

Sasaki stood up and left the room. I followed her out of the

building, and once more found myself in the back seat of her Crown. Sasaki drove off even more violently than before.

"Nakadachiuri, wasn't it? Near Senbon?"

"Right."

"Feeling better?"

"Yeah, throwing up seems to have done the trick."

"I think," she said, stifling all emotion in her voice. "That you are still hiding something."

"Hiding something? Me?"

"That's what I said."

"Why no. As you can see, I am an innocent, harmless, upstanding young man."

"Really?" she said, with uncharacteristic sarcasm. "You don't look it, but I'll take your word for it."

"Have I done something to suggest otherwise?"

"Of course not. The fact that you even ask suggests guilty thoughts on your part. If you ask me, upstanding young men don't break into murder scenes."

"....oh."

She'd had that up sleeve.

I'd been aware they might find out, but it still caught me off guard. There was no mention of it in the documents Kunagisa had provided. I'd assumed they hadn't found out, or if they had, weren't clear on the details.

But instead Sasaki managed to look right inside me without taking her eyes off the road.

"You can relax. I've kept that information to myself. For now."

"Only you know?"

"That's what I said."

There was no emotion in her voice, but I couldn't shake the feeling she was being a little bit mean. Something about her tone reminded me of humanity's strongest red consultant.

"I don't know what you intended to accomplish by breaking

into Emoto's room, but try and avoid any further rash behavior. Consider that well-meaning advice."

"Not a warning?"

"No, advice."

I bristled at little at the wording of the advice, but since what I had done had been ill-considered and careless, it probably did count as rash behavior.

"Sasaki, if I can ask...why have you kept the information to yourself? For now?"

"Well, that would be a long story. For the moment, I just want you to remember that I hold and continue to hold the advantage. Make sure you remember that."

"....."

I sighed. What else could I do? It was like a weight off my shoulders. This again. Why was everyone I met like this?

"It seems like everyone I know is smart and evil. It's starting to get hard to tell them apart. Just for variety's sake I'd like to mean someone nice, even if they're stupid."

"Tough," Sasaki said, not smiling at all. "I've no intention of changing."

We reached the intersection at Senbon Nakadachiuri. I asked if she wanted to come in, but she refused, saying she was on duty. I did not consider this a great shame, but neither was it a relief.

She rolled down her window and asked one last question.

"What do you think X/Y is?"

I waited a moment before shrugging. I didn't believe she would be satisfied with that, but she nodded quietly, closed her window, and drove away.

I stood there for a while, but could see no point in it, so I went inside. Climbed the stairs, and entered my room.

It was quiet here.

No sounds.

Nobody around.

Aoii Mikoko had come here.

Twice.

The first time I'd provided yatsuhashi, and the second she'd brought home made sweet potato treats.

I didn't make a habit of wallowing in sentiment.

Pessimism wasn't my style...

...any more than romanticism was.

I was fundamentally a trivialist.

"Even with that in mind," I whispered, "It's not like I didn't have any idea. I could never say that. Never."

I remembered the conversation I'd had with Mikoko the day before.

I would never have a conversation with her again.

".....it's all nonsense."

I wondered if Mikoko hated the person who'd killed her. Probably not. But she might be mad at them. That's the kind of girl she was.

Was there really nothing?

Nothing I could have said to her?

Nothing I should have said to her last night?

"...hindsight."

A cold, curt monologue.

I felt like this was a time other people would cry.

The other me on my shoulder thought so, anyway.

In the evening.

Miiko came to visit, worried about me.

"Eat," she said, putting some gruel in front of me. Her expression was as stoic as ever, but her eyes shone with genuine concern. Which made me feel worse.

Why...

...could I not live without influencing others?

"Thanks," I said, taking the spoon she'd provided (my room only had disposable chopsticks) and ate it. Miiko was not the best cook, but the gruel had flavor enough.

She did not ask what happened. She never did. She just watched in silence. A true neighbor. A different emotion than kindness might lie behind it, but Miiko was a good person, I thought.

I'd said the same...

...about Mikoko.

"Mikoko is...dead," I said, with no warning.

Miiko nodded.

"That night," she said, as if it meant little to her. "The night she slept in my room. She woke up in a very bad mood. I thought it was the hangover, but I guess not."

"....."

"When I asked how she felt, the girl said, 'It's the worst morning ever.' End of story."

"It's enough," I said. "Thank you, Miiko."

"You really do lead a horrible life. The path you follow isn't steep, but is precarious. How you manage not to take a wrong step I do not know."

"I did that a long time ago. But gravity works in strange ways around this path. I'm stuck to the underside of it now."

"You're facing a trial now," Miiko said, lowering her voice a little, like she was making a threat. "If you step off the path now, nothing good will come of it. Everything you've worked to accomplish will evaporate. You might not care, but your life is not yours alone. Don't forget there are people saved by your life alone."

"There are no such people."

Perhaps I was simply being hard on myself. Maybe that's why there was a look of pity in her eyes.

"You carry too much. Others aren't influenced as easily as you believe. If something turns red by proximity, it is a flaw in that thing. Knowing your own mind frees you from undue influence from others. You aren't causing as many problems for others as you believe."

"...maybe that's true."

Mere inflation of self-worth.

I was the kind of person where it made no difference if I was alive or dead.

Where I was...

...whether a psycho killer was there or not...

...the world would not move.

"But there are still people that care about you. People that love you unconditionally. That's what ties the world together. You may not understand that yet, but remember what I'm saying. Someday it will make sense to you. Stay alive until it does."

People that loved me unconditionally.

One of those died today.

How many were left?

"I won't tell you to cheer up. This is a problem you have to work out for yourself. But it's not your fault that girl died. I promise you that. I promise you without any grounds to base that promise on. People who die are just dead."

"But...it's like I killed her."

"Did you kill her?"

"...no, I didn't. But...if..."

If.

If I hadn't left Mikoko alone. If I hadn't gone home. Or if I'd taken her here.

This would not have happened.

"That's what I mean by carrying too much. Thoughts like that serve no purpose. You know that, right?"

"I do. But, Miiko. There was one more thing I wanted to say to her."

One more thing.

One thing I had left unsaid.

"Regretting what you can't change only makes things worse. That's all I can really say here, but..." Miiko's gaze wandered briefly. "There is something I forgot to say this morning, something Suzunashi ordered me to pass on to you."

".....? A message of some kind?"

Miiko nodded. I straightened up. Suzunashi wasn't here or anything, so maybe I didn't need to sit up straight, but Suzunashi Neon was the kind of person who put you on your best behavior even when she wasn't there.

"There are people who are frightening because you don't know what they'll do, and those who are frightening because you do. But you aren't particularly frightening, so you don't need to worry about that."

"...I will remember this always."

"Do. She's planning on coming down to the city soon, so the three of us should go out to eat. She's looking forward to lecturing you."

"Not keen on the lecture, but the food sounds good. But..."

"But what?"

"Never mind. Looking forward to it."

I handed the gruel dish back to Miiko.

She took it, wished me good night, and left the room. The kanji on the back of her jinbei said "impermanence." This was only the second time I'd seen that one.

"I really am..."

Alone, I whispered to myself.

My existence...

...was a problem.

Perhaps a day long lecture from Suzunashi would help.

But.

"But I don't want to go to that shop again any time soon..."

I wasn't sure...

...when tonight's soul searching would end.

Me (Narrator)  
Main Character

Chapter 7: Death and (Sin)icism



**Kill anyone suspicious.  
Whoever is left did it.**

Three days passed. It was now May 25, a Wednesday.

I woke up at 11:50 AM.

"Seems a little pathetic to insist I made it up before noon."

I sat up, sighing. I was getting used to waking up in this mood. To not waking up like I usually do. Like my entire body rejected the idea of rising. The later I slept the less I wanted to go to school, and if I didn't want to go, I wasn't going.

Come to think of it, this was my fifth straight day skipping. Skipping half the second month of my freshman year was bound to lead to me repeating the year, but the idea of repeating a year didn't particularly bother me. I was paying my own tuition, either way.

"....."

Sasaki and Kazuhito had come by with more questions Monday, and again on Tuesday. In return for my answers to detailed questions about what had happened with Mikoko, they had provided me with several key pieces of information.

Mikoko's time of death was between 9:30 and 10:00 AM. The cause of death was strangulation with a thin piece of cloth. Likely the same cloth that had been used to murder Tomoe – which had led the police to conclude that they had been murdered by the same person.

"The main difference from the Emoto case is that Aoi was strangled from the front."

"The front?"

"Right. Emoto was strangled from behind. We can tell from the shape of the bruise."

"So Mikoko could see whoever killed her?"

"It's certainly possible," Sasaki said, without emotion. Whether the deceased had seen her killer or not didn't matter at all to her. All that mattered was the facts.

They also covered the alibis of those involved. Muimi was out sightseeing with her sister (whose name, apparently, was Muri). Akiharu had no alibi. I was with Miiko. But since all of us had alibis for Tomoe's death, we were not considered suspects.

"I don't agree, but my superiors like this as a burglary gone wrong. Or possibly a stalker of some kind."

"But that stops working once a second death occurs. Coincidence seems unlikely, and nothing was stolen, right? And neither was beaten."

"Correct. But they had too few enemies to see this as a simple crime of passion. Neither Emoto nor Aoi was disliked. An 'enemy of the world', perhaps, but there's little difference between that and indiscriminate killing."

Oh, right.

The actual serial killings had stopped; no new dissected corpses had been found beyond the previous twelve. No new victims had been found since Aikawa first met Zerozaki. Like she said, Zerozaki must have left Kyoto – perhaps even Japan. If I'd made an enemy like Aikawa, I'd have fled to the South Pole. Possibly to outer space.

"But there is one thing I find strange," Sasaki said.

"Strange?"

"The security cameras. You know her building had security cameras everywhere, right?"

"Yes."

"We checked the footage. But found absolutely no one that we'd call a suspect."

"So what does that mean?"

"It means what it means. We watched all the footage after her return – after you carried her home. Everything after 10:30 PM. But everyone the cameras captured lives in the building...until your arrival in the morning."

So what did *that* mean? Did it mean the entire building had become one giant closed room? Ridiculous. There were limits to

how unrealistic things could be. Unless, of course, that was the reality we lived in.

"But there must be angles the cameras don't cover."

"Yeah, we checked that. It is possible to get to Aoi's room without being seen by any camera. The cameras pan back and forth, like so. But you'd have to practice it...and even then, it would be very difficult to pull off. Would anyone really bother?"

"So...what about the balcony?"

"Impossible. Too high, too risky. At any rate," Sasaki said, with an exhausted sigh that seemed quite out of character, "We're left with a war of attrition."

From the look of things, that war had already started.

"...attrition, hunh."

But for all the new information Sasaki brought me, I had already stopped thinking about either case. I can't say they had completely stopped drifting into my head from time to time, but I had stopped forcing myself to think about them.

Quite the opposite.

I now found myself hoping the truth would not come to light. I no longer wanted anything to do with any of this.

But that wasn't possible. Sasa Sasaki was an excellent detective. Each conversation I'd had with her only reinforced that impression. She wasn't friends with Aikawa for nothing; it was only a matter of time before she figured things out. Or at least arrived at a version of the truth that satisfied all known details.

So there was no need for me to think about it. Or to be slightly more honest, I had already figured out most of the truth. But being one step away from understanding everything had just left me even more convinced I did not want to do that; it left me with no desire to blame anyone.

After breaking into Tomoe's room and calling in favors with Kunagisa, this was a half-assed way to end things, but ending things in a half-assed way was hardly an unprecedented action on my part. My whole life was half-assed. A life devoid of desperation

or resolve.

"So..." I stretched, forcibly changing channels inside my mind. "Haven't gone to see Tomo in a while."

She never left the house, so I could drop in on her any time and be certain she was there. It was noon, so she might well be asleep, but that didn't bother me. It would serve her right for selling me out to Aikawa.

And...

She always cheered me up.

I changed clothes, and put my phone in my pocket. Should I borrow Miiko's Fiat, walk, or take my bike? Walk. I was in the mood for walking. It would take like, three hours, but that suited me just fine.

I left the room, and locked the door behind me.

It was a beautiful day. Clear, but for once, not humid at all. If only it was like this every day...but if it was, we'd take it for granted.

"...hm."

I'd been walking for a bit when I saw someone I recognized. I did not remember him, but I knew I'd seen him before. Who was he? I must have met him somewhere...

Street fashion, hair dyed light brown, slacker cut. But the big bag hanging off his right shoulder didn't seem to match his style. Why was it Japanese men were so bad at pulling off street fashion? It never came naturally to them; they all just looked like posers. Maybe because the look originated in a different place and culture.

Anyway...who was he?

He noticed me, and came jogging over.

"Sup!" he said.

"Hi," I replied. My memory continued to fail me. I felt comfortable assuming he must go to Rokumeikan University, but...did I actually know anyone like this?

"How you been? Man, I do not know this part of town at all.

Got myself totally lost."

"Yeah," I said, evasively. "It happens."

"You ought to come to school, man! Save me the trouble of coming to check on you. I mean, sure, that business with Aoi must have been a shock, but you can't go double dragonin' a year because of it."

Aoi? He knew about her?

Oh. I remembered him now.

"Akiharu, right?"

"Yeah. You just remembered?" he laughed, but I still felt distinctly uncomfortable. I should have tried to hide it.

"You were coming to see me?"

"Yep. Got something for you. Come on."

And with that, Akiharu started walking. I had no idea what he might have for me or why we needed to go somewhere if he did, but I followed after him anyway. Once again, I was going along with events as they happened.

"Where are we going, Akiharu?"

"Kitano Tenmanguu. It's parked over there."

"Parked? What is?"

"You'll see when we get there," he said, grinning. "...you know, you always were a gloomy dude, but you're even gloomier now."

"Your polar opposite, then."

"Yeah, well. We already went through Emoto, right? Built up my tolerance, like. Before I got over the shock of that one, bam. Like, wow, life sure is fragile."

He tossed it off like it wasn't a big deal, but I felt like he was covering for something. But for what? I pondered it a minute, but got nowhere.

"Akiharu, don't you have a class right now? You okay skipping?"

"Yeah, whatever. School just...doesn't matter anymore," he said, with a bitter smile. "And if someone asks me to do something,

I gotta do it. Even if it kills me, yeah? Anyway. And I can't stand Inosen, so to hell with core classes."

Inosen must be short for Inokawa-sensei.

"Really? Seemed like a decent teacher to me."

"Decent teachers and dictators are different things, man. That whole tardiness thing, always forcing his own values on everyone else. Rubs me the wrong way. At least he's not a hypocrite, but he might as well be, you know?"

"...hunh."

"I can blow a few days without losing credit, anyway. This place is super flexible like that. They say you can sleep through every class and still pass. Ranked second in all Kansai that way."

I wondered which school was first, but decided not to ask. It seemed rather beside the point.

It was only a five minute walk to Kitano Tenmanguu. A national treasure it might be, but having it within walking distance left it out of sight, out of mind and I'd never actually set foot inside the shrine.

"Over here," Akiharu said, waving me towards the parking lot. "There it is."

He was pointing – rather proudly – at a white Vespa. A vintage model. One glance at the license plate confirmed it was Mikoko's Vespa, the one she'd ridden to meet me.

"....."

"Here," he said, handing me the key. I blinked at it, confused, and he pulled a helmet out of his bag, and hung it on my raised fist. That explained the oversized bag, at any rate.

"Um, Akiharu..."

"Yeah, well...something to remember her by?"

"You mean...you want me to have it? The Vespa?"

"You like it, don't you?" he said, and sat down on the back of it, facing me. He patted the side of it, grinning. "Aoi told me. You don't react to much of anything, but she said you lost your shit over her Vespa."

"I wouldn't say that, but...are you sure I can just take it? These aren't cheap. Wouldn't her family..."

"They're cool with it. Don't worry."

"But why me? I only just met her..."

"It's what she wanted. Would have wanted." He thought for a moment. "Nah, I was right the first time. It's what she wanted."

"How do you know?"

"Um...she kinda told me? Like last week. If something happened to her...like, if she wound up murdered the way Emoto was. Then I should give the Vespa to Li-kun. Heartless of her – she knew I wanted it. I said as much, too. You know what she said? 'Hell no. Drop dead. Or not, whatever.' Three years I'd known her."

"She thought...?" Something might happen? Like this? "What did she mean?"

"I dunno. Aoi had her own way of dealing with it all, I guess. With Emoto's death. But I don't think she really expected to be murdered herself."

No, that wasn't true.

That wasn't true at all, Akiharu.

It wasn't that simple.

Have you really not noticed?

"Anyway, take it. It's a present from her."

"...sure." I twirled the key around my fingers a moment, then put it in my pocket.

"Get your own insurance or whatever. I can't be bothered with all that paperwork. Argh," he leaned back on the Vespa, stretching his arms out towards the sky. Then he slumped forward, glaring at his feet. "What a mess."

"Yeah," I felt the same way. "How's Muimi doing?"

"...she's...well, she's not good. I hate to say it, but...I couldn't stand to look at her."

He looked away, avoiding my eye. Perhaps remembering how Muimi had looked. Perhaps not. Didn't matter. I'd come to realize that as carefree as his tone might be, underneath it all he

cared deeply for his friends.

I felt like I'd grasped his nature at last – too good a soul to admit it to himself. Convinced he wasn't anything special, covered it by acting the clown, by acting shallow.

Even though the shallow clown was me.

"I swung by Atemiya's place once since Aoi was killed. It's over by Senbon Teranouchi. Aoi was depressed after Emoto was killed, but nothing like this bad, man. Not that I blame her. They'd known each other since they were kids. Their whole lives."

"...she was that bad?"

"Yeah. Just glared at me. Like it was my fault. Like she blamed me for it. Her eyes boring right through me. I could tell she wasn't eating. Wasn't sleeping. Felt like she was gonna up and die too if someone didn't take care of her. Wish I knew how."

He shook his head.

"But what can I say? I haven't even know her that long, really. Since high school? That's nothing."

Longer than me. Even if time wasn't a factor, I had even less idea what to say to her.

"...gonna kill the murderer."

"Muimi is?"

"Yeah. Can't blame her. It's what friends are for."

"But if you kill a murderer...that's still a crime."

"...yeah, true enough. You're right, Ii-kun. But...sometimes shit like the law? Or common sense? It just doesn't matter."

"Doesn't...?"

"For a second or two, anyway. Then it all comes crashing down. But by then it's too late. Guess it doesn't work that way for you."

He sounded oddly certain.

"What do you mean?"

"Cause nothing matters to you," he chuckled, pointing at my heart. "Least, that's what Aoi said. I mean, when I talk about Aoi, do you feel bad? At all?"



"Not really."

"Then let's talk about her," he said. "I'm in that kinda mood. She told me the first time she saw you she thought, 'I'm gonna fall in love with this guy.' You knew she loved you, right?"

"...yeah."

"I don't think I did. Not at the time. I was her friend, so this might sound weird, but she was a hell of a catch. I don't mean just good looking, that don't have nothing to do with the quality of a woman."

"You aren't a looks first kinda guy?"

"Nope. All hot girls look like they're plotting something."

I didn't think their beauty was to blame.

But I didn't make a point of it.

"But whenever she was plotting something she'd up and tell you all about it. Everything she was was on the surface. Right there for you to see. Inside and out. Like two-sided tape."

A baffling metaphor.

"I've never met anyone as open as her. Not even when I was a kid. I thought she was stupid at first. Anyone would. You look at someone like her and go, 'Yikes' or something."

"I certainly did."

"Yeah. But she's not stupid. Not at ditz or super immature or emotionally underdeveloped. She was bright enough, 'with it' where she needed to be."

"I agree."

"...once I worked that out? Honestly, I was jealous. I can't be that way. Not in the least. I can't cry when I want to cry or laugh whenever I want to. Too busy being reasonable, or obstinate, or just plain fucked up. So I watched her get mad when she didn't like stuff or really enjoy herself when things went well and I was jealous. But I couldn't even admit that I was jealous. I just thought I was annoyed."

"...we covered something like that in class."

"Yeah. The theory of yadayada. I was in that class...young

people today don't have the words, etc. Can't disagree. I didn't have the vocabulary to put what I was feeling into words, to figure out why I was mad. To figure out that I wasn't annoyed, I was sad. But Aoi was different. She could put every emotion into words."

"You speak very highly of her," I said, as emotionless as possible. "Did you ever consider asking her out?"

"Um..." Akiharu managed something that was closer to an embarrassed smile than anything else. "Yeah, I am a dude, after all. Can't say it never crossed my mind. And I was a dumb high school kid when I met her; didn't believe girls and guys could actually be just friends."

"I know that type."

I didn't believe in same sex friends, either.

"But it just wasn't right. Same with Atemiya and Emoto. I look at them and yeah, I know they're hot and all but, like...there's no fire there. Or there is, but I wither in it."

"I like that expression. Can't say I don't get where you're coming from."

"Yeah? Well, that's about it, I guess. They're good people. Emoto too. She never let you feel like you were close to her but that wasn't entirely her fault."

"....."

"Point is, I loved Aoi, but not in a romantic or sexual way. I didn't go around hoping she'd be happy, but I did think her winding up unhappy would be a real shame. Like that wasn't something that should ever happen. So if she has someone she's in love with, then, hell, I'll do what I can to help."

"Hunh."

"I'm talking about you, here."

"Yeah, I know. She told me."

"Right," he nodded. "...I don't know if I should really say this..."

"Don't tell me if you don't think it's right."

"No, I will. At first...I was against it. We all were. Emoto in

particular – first time I've ever seen her that upset. 'Anyone but him,' she said. 'If you go out with him we aren't friends anymore.'"

"...such hostility."

"You aren't surprised?"

"I'm frequently detested. I'm more rattled by people liking me."

"Hmm. I wouldn't say I hated you or anything...I mean, I'd barely exchanged two words with you. Just...honestly, my opinion hasn't really changed. I know you're a good guy now, but you still feel...dangerous, somehow."

"....."

"Like you could kill a dude in cold blood and still sleep at night."

"Come on. Give me some credit."

"I'm not saying you would kill anyone. It's more like you *could* kill someone, but you keep that part of you buried, and go on living your life like everything's normal. You got stuff buried inside you that ten normal people couldn't handle. Like you're pretending to be human or something, I don't know."

"...hunh."

I was pretending to be calm, but inside, I really wanted to whistle. If I'd been able to whistle, I would have, and shown my admiration that way. Not many people could be that accurate after less than a month observing me.

I guess he wasn't friends with Tomoe for nothing.

"But Aoi can be seriously stubborn. Would not hear otherwise. In the end, we gave up. We agreed to a trial. See if you were right for her. A test to see if it would work."

"The birthday party?"

"Yep. I mean, it really was Emoto's birthday." He sighed, and hung his head. "Not that it matters now she's dead. Now they're both dead."

"Akiharu," I said, forcing my voice to stay neutral. "Who do you think killed Mikoko?"

"How should I know? I'd rather not. I'd prefer not to know. If I found out, I'd hate the shit out of them, and...that's not something I'm really built for. Never really been into hating on people. Just makes me miserable."

"...yeah," I said, letting his words echo through my mind. I nodded. "I guess you're right."

Akiharu had his own way of living with it. But where did that leave me? How should I live with it?

"....."

Then...

I felt someone looking at me. I looked around. There was a crowd of tourists; flocks of students on field trips. No one else.

"What's up, Ii-kun?"

"Thought someone was watching me."

"Hmph. Your imagination?"

"Probably. But...it's not the first time I've had that feeling, these days."

"Ooh, what if it's Aoi's ghost?"

"Maybe it is. Maybe."

Akiharu was joking, but to my ears, it felt awfully real.

"Okay," Akiharu said, hopping down off the Vespa. "Didn't mean to talk your ear off. This is yours. Enjoy."

"I will."

"Take care of, man. It was Aoi's."

"Should I name it after her? The Mikokomobile?"

He gaped at me.

"...no, don't do that. Don't go naming vehicles. Just...makes you emotional about them."

"Knowing it was hers doesn't? Can't see it make things much worse."

"Point," he said, nodding. "But not the Mikokomobile."

He stretched again.

"Right. Vespa's in your hands, talked about Aoi...nothing left to regret not doing."

"Mm?" His turn of phrase didn't sit well with me. It sat poorly enough I decided to question it. "You sound like you're shipping out to the front lines."

"Ha ha ha, nah, nothing like that, just..." His smile was self-deprecating, yet resigned. "I'll probably be the next one killed."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it literally. If I mean anything by it at all."

Leaving my question unanswered, he waved, and walked away. I considered stopping him, and went so far as to reach out my hand and open my mouth...and then didn't.

I sighed.

She'd left me her Vespa.

I wasn't sure I had any right to use it, but I also felt certain that nobody else did. Owning something like this would come in handy. I wouldn't have to borrow Miiko's Fiat so often.

Maybe that was Mikoko's plan.

The thought amused me.

A little.

"Now I've got to rent a parking spot..."

No idea how you went about doing that. Would have to ask Miiko. With that in mind, I headed back to the apartment.

## 2

Wait, what are you doing here, Mikoko?

'Sup, li-kun. Been a while.

Uh...oh, I get it. This is a dream.

Ah ha ha, took you long enough. I guess you are a bit of a realist. Yet you have your romantic side – or maybe just classic? Half and half. Plus 30% pessimist.

Mind your totals.

Oops.

You aren't Mikoko, are you?

You got me! So who am I?

I dunno.

It's up to you. This is your dream.

Tomoe, then.

Why do you think that? I might not be her. Maybe I'm Kunagisa. I could be Aikawa, or Muimi, or Akiharu, or Miiko, or Suzunashi, or someone else.

I can talk to the others any time I want, but I can't do that with you. Tomoe's the only person I want to talk to that I can't.

That's a lie. There are others.

No. No, no. I don't want anything more to do with them.

Okay. Have it your way. Let's say you're right. So what do you want to talk about? There's a lot you didn't get to discuss that day.

Yes. There is. One thing I particularly wanted to ask...

Yes?

Do you bear a grudge?

Against the person who killed me? You're right, I don't. Like I said, I want to be reincarnated. I hated myself. So I don't regret dying at all.

Yeah...that just sounds like an excuse.

It is an excuse. Anything you say with words ends up being an excuse. Do you read a lot of mystery novels, Ii-kun? Hardcore mysteries, the super technical ones?

I don't read many books at all. I used to. Now only to kill the time. But I know what mystery novels are like.

Good. I was a big fan. I would read any kind of novel, but mysteries were my favorite. They were so easy to understand. But I hated it when they made the motive too complicated. Sure, you need a good reason to kill someone. Something worth the risk.

Yeah. Someone very like me said the same. High risk, but low return. Yet he's a human failure only able to prove he exists by murdering others.

The thing is, motives are just explanations. Rationalizations. Why they did it comes down to personal feelings. For example, they said that gentlemen don't kill for themselves. They kill for others, for what is right. But wait – for others? How? What is right?

I don't know.

I don't either. And anyone who claims they do is just trying to justify their own behavior. I don't know how that applies to who killed you...or maybe I don't want to understand.

Why not?

Because there was no plan. I can't be as sure about Mikoko's death, but you were killed with no plan at all. A spur of the moment decision.

You're probably right. But who cares? I don't hold a grudge, and I don't regret dying. Really. I absolutely mean it.

And you'll be Mikoko in your next life?

Yes.

But Mikoko died.

She did.

What do you think about that? You don't care about your own death, but what do you think about the one who sent Mikoko to hers? Do you hold a grudge against them?

No. Again, I don't.

Isn't that kind of heartless? Weren't you friends?

I never thought I'd hear that from you, Ii-kun.

Even I have friends.

Kunagisa? Or Miiko? Not Muimi or Akiharu, I'm sure. But whatever you think, Ii-kun, I'm not capable of feeling sad about a friend's death. I know how to feel sad, but I never actually do. I guess you could say I don't have the right quantity of emotions.

I can't say I don't understand.

Maybe I'm a little paranoid. Somewhere fundamental I could never bring myself to trust people. All you need is to be hurt once, and you can never trust anyone ever again.

That's an exaggeration.

You don't believe that.

I do.

You don't.

I don't.

Anyone who knows how much humans love to discriminate can never trust someone again. Japanese people are particularly bad at it. For example, a friend of yours is hurt by some other people. One against the crowd. What should you do in that case? Obviously, stick up for your friend. But most people don't do that. They side with the majority. Humans need companionship. It doesn't matter who those companions are, as long as you have them. The nature of the group is irrelevant, of no value or meaning. Once you realize that harsh truth, it's impossible to trust another human. I mean...Ii-kun, do you have any family?

If I didn't, I wouldn't exist.

That's not what I mean.

They're around. In Kobe somewhere. I haven't seen them in years. Mikoko said I wasn't the sort to look after my parents. She's right...I haven't seen them since I was in junior high. We barely qualify as a family.

Sounds like you've got problems.

Not the way you mean it. It wasn't like that at all. We never had a problem. If any of us had ever noticed anything like a problem I'd never have wound up like this. What about you, Tomoe? Did you have a family?

Hmm...I wouldn't really call them that. There's a reason I chose a college away from home, a reason I lived on my own. Mikoko and the others might have been in the same boat.

You can't even trust your family?

Right. How can you? You can't even trust yourself. I forget who said, "There's nothing certain in this world," but I know what they mean. The world always felt so delicate you push the wrong place and everything comes tumbling down. But that wasn't the case; I was the one who was delicate, I was the one who couldn't stand up to the slightest push.

A defective product.

That's right. Think about it. Can someone who has never once cried be considered human? I can make it look like I'm



smiling, but does that make me human?

I'm the same. I used to try and convince myself it was just what made me unique.

Not anymore?

No. To hell with all that. Being different isn't necessarily good. If you've ever really thought about what being fundamentally different from the rest of the crowd truly means, you would never dream of spouting such nonsense. There are people who were chosen. Geniuses who leave their names in history. Those people were mostly pretty broken. But they were normal. None of them were seriously strange. They were normally broken. But...Tomoe, the way you put it, you didn't trust Muimi, Akiharu, Mikoko...you didn't believe in them.

Yeah. I don't deny it. I agree with you. I doubt you'll misunderstand me, but that's really hard. I knew Mikoko was a good girl. I knew Akiharu was a nice guy, and Muimi would put her friends before anything else in the world. Yet I couldn't trust them. I couldn't ever really feel like we were friends, not deep down. And that made me feel so dirty. They loved me so much, and I couldn't return those feelings at all.

I know. You feel like apologizing for it all the time.

Exactly. That's why I'm glad. A defective product like me is better off dead.

And Mikoko?

That's her problem. I'm already dead, I've got nothing to say about her. And this isn't what you really want to ask me, Li-kun.

There's so much I want to talk about. Or maybe just a little bit. Really, only one thing.

Then go ahead.

Is it all right for me to go on living?

That is the fundamental question.

Humans are cogs in society's wheel, but I provide no benefit to society, there is no meaning to my existence...so does that mean I don't deserve to live?

That was a question I wrestled with myself. One my death freed me of. In the end, there's only one word I can give in response to that question.

What is it?

"....."

Beep beep beep beep beep beep beep.

A horrible electronic noise woke me up.

"....."

I let out a long breath.

And sat up.

I'd been sleeping directly on the tatami, no futon in sight.

An unpleasant dream. Horribly arbitrary, filled with self-loathing, and I'd talked to Tomoe barely an hour all told, so how could I possibly claim to understand the inner workings of her mind?

Yet another part of me felt oddly convinced the dream had told the truth.

"No use finding a kindred spirit in the dead..."

Part of me must still be preoccupied with beep beep beep beep beep beep so I needed to beep beep beep beep beep after this I'd beep beep beep beep beep

Okay, there was time for that later.

That beeping was not an alarm. My phone was ringing. I hated ring tones, so it was set to the default beep, which now struck me as a singularly unpleasant noise. I pressed the talk button.

"Hello?"

"....."

No response. But I could hear breathing. The call had definitely connected.

"Um, hello? Can you hear me?"

"....."

"Helloooo? Is my voice reaching you? Yours is not reaching me."

"....."

Weird. Maybe my phone was broken? I'd left it in my pocket when I did laundry the other week, but technology intended for regular use didn't usually break that easily, so was this maybe...a prank call?

"If you don't say anything, I'm gonna hang up. Okay?"

When Mikoko had called me the other day, she'd thought she had the wrong number and panicked. I smiled at the memory.

"Right, hanging up now. In five. Four. Three. Two....."

"....."

They said something. But so softly I couldn't make it out.

"Sorry, can you say that louder?"

"....Kamogawa Park."

"Hunh? Kamogawa?"

"..... 'm waiting in Kamogawa Park ....."

I could barely hear it, like they were using the bare minimum air necessary to make their voice box vibrate. I couldn't tell if they were male or female, old or young. There was no intonation, no emotions that I could make out.

"What? Say that again? Who are you?"

".....Mikoko."

They hung up.

I threw the phone on the floor, and stood up. I stretched my hands out above me. The ceiling was low enough that I could reach it. Who was it lived upstairs? Right, the fifteen-year-old and his thirteen-year-old sister. They were very close, and even I felt like smiling when I saw them. But their lives were pretty desperate, so I didn't.

The apartment building was three stories, two rooms a floor. Six rooms in all. Two were currently empty. The third floor had the kids and an old man who had long since given up on the world. He was into Christian stuff, and often clashed with Miiko over her love of Japanese things, but they definitely did not dislike each other. Both rooms on the first floor were empty, but the landlord said

someone was moving in next month. There was demand, even for a place like this.

"....enough avoiding reality."

I sat back down, and picked up my phone. I glanced at the call history, but the last call showed no number. Of course. Right, time to think.

"Kamogawa Park...is Kamogawa Park. Obviously."

The caller was waiting there? Fine. I accepted that much. The problem was the next bit. The answer they'd given when I asked for their name.

"Mikoko...means *that* Mikoko. I guess."

Nobody else could have a name like that. But at the same time, the caller clearly wasn't Mikoko. She was dead. If dead people could make phone calls the carriers would have been overloaded ages ago.

"....."

I tried thinking, but with this little information there was nothing to think about. Just trying to think about it meant basically deluding myself.

I backed out of the call history, and checked the time.

11:30 PM.

May 25. Wednesday.

"....."

Um, what had I done all day?

I remembered waking up before noon, and leaving the house to visit Kunagisa, but running into Akiharu, who gave me Mikoko's Vespa, and then coming back to the apartment and talking with Miiko about renting parking space somewhere, which sounded super complicated so I rage slept.

"...I rage slept?"

Like I was five.

That had been about two o'clock. The reason I felt like I was missing time was because I'd been sleeping for ten hours. Sleeping Beauty herself would scoff at the amount of sleep I was getting. I'd

been awake for three of the last twenty four hours.

"I should probably do something else for a change..."

At any rate, then came the phone call. That bizarre, barely verbal, incoherent, whispered phone call. A call devoid of meaning, singularly defined by its lack of meaning.

"So what should I do about it?"

I had two choices. Do as they asked, and go to Kamogawa Park...or ignore the shit out of the whole thing. If I applied anything resembling common sense, I should absolutely choose the latter. But any sense I had wasn't common. And the name they dropped made it impossible for me to ignore. Made this decision for me.

I washed my face, and threw on some new clothes.

"Been a while since my last nonsense."

I left a note, then left my apartment. The Vespa was illegally parked in an alley nearby, until I got the parking situation sorted. I considered walking, but Kamogawa Park was a fair distance from here. The caller had not specified a time, but sooner was better than later.

As I turned east on Imadegawa, a straight line to the park, I found myself thinking again. What had been the point of that dream? I didn't exactly believe in ghosts or mediums or life after death, but neither did I have strong feelings against them. I had my share of strange experiences, and was not hard-headed enough to disbelieve anything I had not directly encountered. But this was not classic literature, and dreams were dreams, unlikely to be invaded by other minds. That was my dream – a product of my mind and no other.

"...lingering emotions? Or desires...?"

Either way, it was a trick of the mind. Not worth paying any attention. What mattered was that I'd dreamed of Tomoe, not Mikoko. That defined the depth of my sin.

"Face your sin. That is your punishment."

Suzunashi had said that to me back in February. For someone not psychic, she sure saw through everything. She made

people feel like they couldn't live up to her without making them feel inferior. Not a type you ran into often.

Horikawa, Karasuma, past Kawaramachi, and then there was Kamogawa. It might be the middle of the night, but that didn't mean I could just drive a scooter into the park. I parked it next to the bridge, and went down the bank to the side of the river, into Kamogawa Park.

"Now what?"

Kamogawa Park was not exactly a small park. It wasn't particular wide, but it was very long. And the opposite bank of the river was still technically part of the park. Nobody in Kyoto was dumb enough to set a meeting in this park without also giving the name of the cross street.

"...oh well."

I could only take a phone call like that so seriously. I began walking downstream along the bank. I glanced at my watch; it was just past midnight. It was now Thursday, the 26<sup>th</sup>. May was almost over. Come to think of it, Zerozaki had nearly killed me on the bank of this same river, under the Shijo bridge. Tomoe and Mikoko were both still alive back then.

It seemed like an awfully long time ago.

I didn't think that was my imagination.

...hmm.

I turned around. It was dark, and hard to be sure, but there was no one behind me as far as I could see. But I'd definitely felt like there was.

Like someone was looking at me.

".....hmm."

I'd felt the same thing while I was talking to Akiharu. He'd joked that it might be Mikoko's ghost, but it seemed like a better idea to restrict speculation to more realistic ideas. The most likely explanation was that the police had assigned someone to monitor my activity. I was definitely still a suspect in the murders of both Tomoe and Mikoko.

"But it's a little late for that..."

And there was no need for them to be quite so stealthy about it. That left the next possibility – the person who'd made that mysterious phone call. After all, I was where they'd told me to be. Who else could it be?

"....."

I kept walking, senses heightened. But I didn't feel anyone looking at me. By the time I reached Marutamachi I was getting fed up with the whole thing. Why was I wasting my time on this?

"....time to go home."

I climbed the bank, to the road above. I walked across the bridge to the other side of the river, then down onto the bank – the other side of Kamogawa Park. I had to go back to way I'd come, so taking the opposite bank provided a little variety. There were ducks swimming in the river. Perhaps Kamogawa had earned its name from the words *kamo* (duck) and *kawa* (river.) Hard to believe they'd have named it so literally, but stranger things have happened. I'd never really thought about it before.

Time to head home and sleep...or not, since I already slept way too much. Maybe I should take advantage of my new Vespa, and drive around a while. Or follow the river bank all the way to Maizuru. I needed to get used to riding it around, and it would fill the time.

By this point I had almost reached Imadegawa again. There was a suspicious shadow lurking ahead of me. A bicycle lay by its side. It was so dark I couldn't be sure if the shadow was lurking or just lying down. Probably the latter. Its back was to me, and it wasn't moving. I thought it might be someone homeless, sleeping, but if a homeless person owned a bike, they wouldn't leave it lying on the ground like that. Maybe they'd been out drinking down Kiyamachi, tried to bike home through the park, and fell over? I wasn't terribly sympathetic, in that case. Still, I couldn't just leave them. Especially since they had long hair, which probably meant it was a girl.

"Are you okay?" I called out.

No response. No movement – like they were dead. Which was a possibility. A fall off a bike could kill you if you landed wrong. Which you were likely to do, drunk. I might be better off not getting involved, but it was too late for that. I went over and tapped them on the shoulder. "Are you okay?" I asked again. They didn't move.

"Are you okay?" I asked a third time, pulling on their shoulder to try and turn them onto their back. The moment I did, the body suddenly spun around, and unloaded a spray of some kind in my face.

I tried to throw myself backwards, but too late – a dull pain hit my left cheek. By the time I realized I'd been hit, I was already landing hard on my back, unable to catch myself.

They stood up.

Shit. Either the blow to the face or the spray had fucked up my vision. What the hell was that? Not pepper spray; my eyes didn't hurt at all. I tried to pull myself together and get up, but they weren't waiting for that. I gave up and rolled away, dodging their next attack, and just kept rolling, finally rolling up onto one knee ten meters away.

The shadow stood still. It was tall...couldn't get a good sense of its build. My eyes still weren't working right. Not just my eyes. My legs, knees, head, every part of me was staggering. I didn't feel sick, just...like I was falling. Or...more accurately...

....I was sleepy.

I fell to both knees.

Knock out gas. And not the kind they sold ladies for self-defense over the counter. This shit was powerful. I was swiftly losing control over my entire body. In America? Maybe. But I never expected to get hit with something like this in Japan.

They took a step towards me. Even with my vision deteriorating rapidly I could make out the knife in their hand. Knife. Zerozaki Hitoshiki. The Kyoto Killer. Crap, I couldn't even



think straight.

"....why..."

Who? Why? Not what I should be focusing on now. If I passed out here...even with my mind reeling I knew how bad that would be. I'd be killed, or something damn well close.

God damn it. I had to do something fast. But the human mind resists the idea of hurting yourself. You can't help but hesitate. They were walking slowly. Of course; they just had to wait for me to pass out. This was my only chance.

Right or left hand.

I hesitated a second, then picked right. "Time to go all Nenbutsu no Tetsu," I said, and grabbed my right thumb with my left hand. I put it off for one last moment, then twisted hard, the wrong way around. "Rrraaaaaaaugh!" It hurt just listening to my scream.

I'd broken it, or dislocated it at least. The pain blasted away all urge to sleep. My mind was sharp again, my eyes and body woke back up. Every nerve in my body was screaming. I scrambled to my feet, facing them.

They were dressed all in black, a black ski mask covering their face and hair. The long hair I'd seen earlier must have been a wig. Leather gloves. Even with my eyes working again, they blurred into the night and I struggled to make out anything more. Shadow had not just been a figure of speech. If you had to attack someone, this was how to dress. They looked more psycho than Zerozaki, more like a killer than he did.

"God damn it...who are you?"

They didn't answer. All I heard was the sound of them breathing. The knife pointed at me, getting closer. There was nothing around that looked like a makeshift weapon. I didn't even have my phone with me. Couldn't even call for help.

"Have it your way," I said, and, bracing myself, stepped forward. This seemed to surprise them, and the knife swing came a second late. I tried to ram my palm into their chin, but they bent

backwards, dodging it, and raised the knife again.

The shadow moved next, thrusting the knife forward. Not the movements of anyone with training – way more wasted motion than Zerozaki. I had no problems dodging. But when I twisted my body to avoid it, my right thumb brushed against my side, and pain shot through me.

Maybe breaking it was a little overkill. I should have ripped the nail off instead. Or broken my little finger – why had I picked the thumb? Was I stupid? Was I a fucking idiot? Born with no damn sense.

The shadow saw me freeze up and took advantage of it. They rammed their shoulder into me, and I lost my balance, falling on my back. They straddle me. Same thing happened to me last month, I thought. How did I get out of it that time?

Before I could remember, the knife swung down. Going for the head...no, the jugular. I twisted my head to the right as hard as I could, just barely avoiding the blade. Not quite avoiding it – it grazed me, and I could feel blood. The shadow pulled the knife out of the ground and raised it up again. I couldn't dodge again, I thought...but the knife stopped. The shadow looked down at me, like they were observing me...then, for some reason, threw the knife away.

Before I could even wonder what that meant, their fist smashed into my cheek. My left again. An instantly later my right took a turn. Then a third blow to the left. To the right. That was hardly the end of it; the shadow kept punching me, as fast and as hard as they could.

I no longer registered the pain.

My brain was shaking.

Then...

The blows suddenly stopped.

But this did not mean they were showing mercy. The shadow's hands went around my shoulder. I knew what they were doing. I knew I should try and stop them, but my body wouldn't

move. The knock out spray had taken its toll, and between that and the pain it was all I could do to stay conscious.

And yet...

There was a sickening pop, and an explosion of pain in my left shoulder that woke me up completely. The shadow had dislocated my shoulder. And then punched the dislocated joint. "NngaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAA!" I let out a wild, bestial howl. I had no idea my throat was even capable of such annihilation.

Who was this? What would make someone want to do this? They didn't want me dead. This wasn't attempted murder; it was pure destruction. They saw me as a thing to be dismantled; they'd dislocated my shoulder the way you solved a brain teaser.

"Ungh...."

I marshaled my freshly wakened mind into fighting back. I raised one side off the ground, pushed the shadow's arm away, made a fist, and thrust it in the general direction of their heart. The impact was nothing, like I'd just punched a magazine. They were wearing something under their clothes to soften the blow.

And I could only punch so hard with this fist, allowing for the broken thumb. They brushed my arm off like swatting a fly, and put their hands on my right shoulder.

I didn't have enough fight left in me to push them off again. The pop barely registered as something that concerned me. I wasn't so lucky with the pain. It was like both my shoulders were being tortured at once. They were screaming at my brain for help, screaming too loud for my brain's numbing defenses to drown it out.

Once again, they punched the dislocated joint, and then, perhaps as payback, began punching me in the heart. I heard bones creaking. Each impact sent shockwaves through my shoulders, which echoed back a duller pain.

".....agh...aaa...."

My mouth was open, gasping for oxygen. All this punching was destroying my lungs. Perhaps this was their goal all along;

either way, the shadow didn't let the opportunity pass. They took a good grip on my jaw. Fucking seriously? That's in the top rank of pain. No time for questions. I debated trying to bite their fingers, but couldn't quite bring myself to do it.

They began applying pressure, pulling on my jaw. The noise it made was a lot less impressive than the shoulders, but the pain blew them away. And, of course, they followed it up with an uppercut.

"....."

I couldn't even manage a scream. I couldn't even manage to try.

I'd like to revise my earlier statement.

They were trying to kill me. This was well beyond all that crap about taking me apart. They clearly planned to beat me to death. To kill me in as painful a manner as they could.

To dissect me.

The shadow thought for a moment – deciding how best to inflict pain next, I suppose – and then took hold of my right wrist.

And squeezed the thumb.

The broken one.

"....."

Heh heh heh.

Someone was laughing.

This scared me.

Who could beat and hurt someone like this...

...and then laugh about it?

I'd never been so frightened of anyone in my life.

"....."

They whispered something I couldn't hear, and switched their grip from my thumb to my index finger. They were about to break it. And not just my index finger, my middle finger, ring finger, and pinky...and then the left hand. Maybe they were planning on breaking every bone in my body, one at a time. After that maybe it would be time for peeling flesh. Maybe after all that

was done, they'd finally kill me.

I'd lost all will to fight back. I couldn't think of a reason to bother. I should have just let the knock out gas do its thing. I'd have been spared all this pain. Breaking my thumb had been a waste. Or wait, no, the pain would have woken me up either way. I'd have been tortured no matter what. This was the only outcome...the steps to get here were just a little different. It was always headed to this premeditated farce.

I was watching from a distance now.

It felt like I was on the opposite bank, seeing myself about to die.

When I saw that...

...what did I think?

What I always thought.

This was ridiculous.

A total waste of everyone's time.

What nonsense...

"What the FUCK are you DOING!?"

A bellow.

I rolled my head toward the voice, towards the opposite bank. It was already empty. But a small figure had jumped down into the river, and was running right across the stream.

I did not even stop to wonder who it was.

I knew as well as I knew myself.

"AaaaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAaaaaAAaaaaaaa!"

Zerozaki.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki came roaring out of the water, and was scrambling up the bank. The shadow was alarmed by the sudden intrusion, but had quickly adapted. They let go of my finger, and

stepped away from my body. They must have recognized that Zerozaki was not someone you could deal with from a compromised position.

As he neared us, Zerozaki threw a knife – not trying to hit the shadow, but trying to get them away from me. Once he reached the top of the bank, he stepped over me, putting himself between me and the shadow. The shadow took the time to pick up their own knife, and prepare themselves.

Zerozaki let out a long breath, trying to get his own breathing back under control.

"New schoolyard bully gotcha down?" he asked. "Or is this some kinda of advanced yoga?"

I tried to answer, but with my jaw dislocated, that wasn't happening.

"...okay, dealing with you first," he said, pointing at the shadow. "What the fuck are you? I might be the last person who should be pointing this out, but this shit's illegal, yo. Assault. Attempted fucking murder. You've heard of right and wrong?"

I had lots to say to that, but couldn't, so didn't.

The shadow took a step back. Breezing into a situation like this, shooting his mouth off, looking careless and sloppy...was actually kind of worrying, to any rational mind.

"Tell you what, the defective product here's in pretty bad shape, and I kinda agreed not to kill anyone if I can help it, so...if you decide to run, I promise I won't come after you."

The shadow took another step back, considering. Mind not quite made up.

"What the fuck? I just gave you permission to run away. So fucking run already. GET."

The shadow said nothing.

Zerozaki sighed dramatically.

"Fine, if we're doing this, let's do it. I got as much time as you got to live. I won't give you time to hurt. I ain't got the mercy in me to spare the suicidal. If you wanna be number thirteen, that's

your lucky fucking number. I'll kill, gut, chop, trim, and carve your ass up."

That did it.

The shadow turned and ran. Zerozaki laughed happily, "Ka ha ha, go on, get outta here." Then he turned back to me. I could see the tattoo on his face for a second, then it started to blur. The gas and the pain were kicking in.

"Dude, don't go to sleep on me! Not without giving me your address."

Zerozaki grabbed my shoulders and shook. This hurt like hell, but at this point, I was past caring.

I wrung the last bit of consciousness...

Forced my dislocated jaw to move...

And told him my address.

### 3

I remembered nothing else until Friday, the 27<sup>th</sup>, around nine in the morning.

"You awake?"

Zerozaki was sitting next to my pillow. I stared blankly at him, dazed, drawing a blank on the whole situation. He appeared to be enjoying himself, happy that I'd woken up.

"You sure live in one hell of an apartment. Took me ages to even find, and the people that live here are craaazy. I borrowed some bandages from the lady next door – she's the first person ever to not be surprised by this tat. You sure took your time waking up. You must have really needed that sleep. For all kinds of reasons."

"...um."

I put my hand down to try and sit up, and a stabbing pain shot up my arm. I yelped, and yanked my hand back, and nearly toppled over. I barely caught myself with my left.

"Dumbass, your thumb's broken. I popped your shoulders and jaw back in place, but I can't fix a break. I patched up what I could but you need to go see a doctor about that."

I looked down at my hand, and there was a large bandage

around it, held in place with bits of metal and wire, keeping the finger from moving. It was clearly improvised, but probably the right call. I could feel something on my face as well, probably gauze and bandages. Apparently he'd been nursing me while I was out.

"Thanks," I said.

"Forget about it," he said, waving a hand. "Your right thumb's the worst! You know how hard it'll be just getting around?"

He was teasing me. The misfortune of others is like honey to psycho killers as well as normal people.

"It's fine, I'm ambidextrous."

"Really?"

"Started out left handed, but they tried to correct it. I hated the teacher who told me I had to hold my chopsticks in my right, so in third grade I put them back in my left and left them there."

"Liar."

"Yeah, sorry."

I tried to make my mind work the way it normally did. I was up, but it still felt like there were cobwebs on my mind.

"...what happened to the Vespa?"

"What Vespa?"

"...never mind."

It was probably still sitting on the Imadegawa bridge. I'd have to go get it. Hopefully before it got towed. More importantly, Zerozaki had somehow managed to carry me all the way back here. This was impressive; astonishing. He was a very small man, but clearly not lacking for endurance.

He appeared to be oblivious to this.

"But what was up with that fight? You fight me to a draw then get your ass kicked by that amateur?"

This hardly seemed fair.

"That fight with you was a special case. Um," I sat up again, being careful of my thumb. "I got a phone call yesterday...or the day before, I guess. They said to come to Kamogawa Park. In



retrospect, an obvious trap. But I feel for it, and this is the result."

"You're a fucking idiot."

I couldn't disagree.

"It was pretty dumb," I admitted. "So my turn to question. Why are you still in Kyoto? I thought you'd left?"

"How'd you know that?"

"No more deaths."

"Oh, right. Yeah, I did leave. I got attacked by this weird red lady? She is some fucking craaaazy what the fuck. I hit her with a bike and she kept on walkin'. And by bike I mean motorcycle? Dunno what her body's made of...anyway, apparently she's trying to catch me or something, and I ain't up for second go around, so I ran off to Osaka. She came after me. So I doubled back to Kyoto to throw her off the scent. Then I hear what sounds like a dog screaming, and I like dogs, so I went to see what was up and you're getting your ass kicked by some wannabe ninja."

"...right, I see."

Zerozaki had clearly gotten bored with all that exposition halfway through, and started talking faster to get through it, but it was enough. His being there to save me had been pure dumb luck.

Or...

Bad luck for the shadow.

"But man, that red lady's something else. Like Aka Manto or something."

"Aikawa," I said. Not exactly trying to pay him back for saving me, but since I'd told her about Zerozaki, it seemed only fair to tell him about Aikawa. Not that I was really someone who should be talking about what was fair and what wasn't.

"Aikawa...?" Zerozaki said, frowning. "Did you just say Aikawa? Meaning Aikawa Jun?"

"Yeah...you've heard of her? Saves me the trouble of explaining."

"No, I mean, Boss dropped her name once, but...Christ, Aikawa Jun, of all people." He groaned. "No wonder I couldn't

scratch her."

"Is she famous or something?"

"Famous...do you know what they call her? Sturm und Drang. Ikki Tousen. The Tiger Smiles Red. The God Slayer. The Desert Eagle. I was specifically told to never have anything to do with her."

"You forgot one."

"What?"

"Humanity's Strongest Consultant."

Zerozaki said nothing. I'd never seen him look so serious. Even Zerozaki stopped joking when he learned he was fighting *the* Aikawa Jun.

"Shit. This is too much a masterpiece," he muttered, then nodded, and stood up. "I'm gone."

"Already?"

"Yeah. Can't cool my heels here any longer. Got to think. No more business to take care of here, no time to be shooting the breeze with you, and the cops are after me too. Can't afford to stay in one place for longer."

"Oh, right."

This made sense. The moment I'd told Aikawa what Zerozaki looked like that description had been sent on to the police. The whole force was looking for him. Staying here as long as he had was already a serious risk.

"Maybe you should turn yourself in?"

"Could do, but won't," he grinned. "You look after yourself. I've been reading the newspaper, I know. That girl Aoi you mentioned got herself killed?"

"...yeah."

"Looks like we're both in deep shit."

"Yeah, it's a real pain."

"You can say that again. But that's the way it goes. So."

"I imagine we'll never see each other again. For real this time."

"Right," Zerozaki said. "Bye!"

And with that, he was gone. Alone in the room, I flopped back down on the futon. Zerozaki had done a good job treating me, or my injuries weren't as bad as they'd seemed; I was in very little pain. I definitely needed to take this broken bone to the hospital, though.

But first I wanted sleep. Was the gas still in effect? No, it had to have worked its way out of my system by now. My body simply wanted more sleep. You'd think it would have had enough by now.

"I guess I was unconscious, not asleep."

And that had caught up to me. I would go to the hospital when I woke up, I decided, and closed my eyes. I'd been under a lot of stress lately. The more I tried not to think about Tomoe and Mikoko the more I'd thought about them. That was how I came to have that dream. The case wasn't solved, not to my satisfaction.

What I needed now was rest. I could deal with that phone call and my shadowy assailant when I woke up.

"Hey!"

But...

Sleep wasn't in the cards for me. Someone was knocking, and calling out. I got up, and opened the door. It was Zerozaki.

"What...did you forget something?"

"In a sense...I forgot to tell you something."

He stepped inside, and sat down on the floor, legs crossed. I sat down on the edge of my futon.

"Waste of a dramatic exit."

"Yeah, but it seemed important. Your phone," he said, pointing. It was lying on the floor in the corner.

"What about it?"

"It rang a bunch while you were out."

"Like what time?"

"This morning. On and on and on. Maybe it woke you up."

I picked it up and flipped over to the call history. I knew that

number. Who was it again...?

"Oh, Sasa's." It was Detective Sasa Sasaki's number. She'd called me seven times between eight and nine this morning. "Wonder what she wants."

"I didn't answer, so I dunno. Figured it was better not to. If you're curious, call her back."

"I will," and hit the call button.

"Who was Sasa again? I heard that name somewhere."

"At the karaoke place. The talented detective lady?"

Zerzaki scowled. Mention of the police didn't sit well with him right now. I wasn't the biggest fan of them myself.

The call connected, and began ringing. I waited.

"Sasa speaking," she answered.

"It's me."

"Where have you been?"

"Um, asleep."

"...okay, fine," she seemed oddly calm.

Like she was forcing herself to sound calm. Which suggested she was anything but.

"Did something happen? Or did you have more questions?"

"Something happened," she said. "Usami Akiharu's been murdered."

"....."

Then...

It all...

Fell into place.

"Usami?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"I was not raised to make light of matters like this. A friend from school found him this morning. He was strangled. Like Emoto and Aoi. I'm at the scene right now."

It did sound like she was speaking quietly, mindful of those around her. There must be a bunch of police and forensic people and neighbors nearby.

Akiharu.

He'd said he'd be killed next.

And he actually had.

"...okay....."

But this was no coincidence. If Akiharu had figured things out, then he must have had good reason to predict his own death. And that reason was why he let himself be killed.

"We'll need you to answer some questions..."

"First, Sasa," I cut her off. "I have some questions about Akiharu's body."

"...okay," she said, playing off the edge in my voice. "I'll answer what I can."

"Only one thing. Is that X/Y message anywhere?"

"Yes," she said, her voice almost a growl. "But about that...we haven't verified it yet, but unlike Emoto or Aoi, Usami himself appears to have left the note."

"....."

"...but what of it? Does that tell you something? Do you know what X/Y might mean?"

No. That wasn't it.

I'd known what that meant a long time ago. And it no longer had any meaning. That wasn't the problem at all.

"...no, I'm afraid not. Right, um...should I meet you at the station?"

"We'd appreciate it. What time should we expect you?"

"This afternoon...no, this evening."

"Very well –"

I hung up on her. The wind was in my sails and I'd say too much if I spoke to her much longer. I was way past calm. I threw the phone down on the floor with a force unthinkable on any ordinary day.

"What the fuck, dude?" Zerozaki said, surprised. "Don't throw your phone. Poor thing."

"Misplaced aggression," I said. "Controlling the rage boiling over inside me by taking it out on nearby objects."

"I got that part."

Zerozaki picked up my phone for me. It appeared to be functioning normally. Once he'd verified that, he placed on the floor as far from me as possible.

"What happened?"

"Akiharu's been murdered."

"Oh. Wow?" Zerozaki said, half impressed, half not interested. "That's three now. Not a bad bodycount. When?"

"Don't know time of death, but it was just discovered. Which narrows it down to between Wednesday at noon and this morning."

"Hunh. Well, that is a masterpiece. Strangling three people in ten days is craaazy. Pot calling the kettle black, I know. So who did it? Who's the killer?"

Zerozaki...

...clearly didn't care.

I...

Spat my answer.

"The killer? Who mean who killed Emoto Tomoe? Who killed Aoi Mikoko? Who assaulted me in Kamogawa Park? And who killed Usami Akiharu?"

"Who else?"

"Isn't it obvious?" My tone was so harsh it made my own skin crawl. "Atemiya Muimi, of course."

311

Atemiya Muimi

Classmate

## Chapter 8: Judgments of the Mind

**You've known all along.**

I'm hardly famed for my personality these days, but when I was still a boy I had a particularly loathsome one. Convinced I was smarter and more intelligent than anyone else, I looked down on everyone. I knew what nobody else did, noticed what no one else noticed, and was incredibly vain about that.

Because of that...

If I had a question, I had to know the answer immediately. I had the skill required, and every time I thought my way to a solution I felt as if I had accomplished something, become someone even more impressive.

But.

While I was busy solving all these problems...no, when I was finished solving all the problems, I was left with nothing.

Everyone else seemed to be enjoying themselves. They had no answers; had not even thought of the questions, but they were happy.

Laughing. Crying. Sometimes they got mad.

And I thought they were ignorant.

I thought they were running merrily through the field, oblivious to the mines buried everywhere. In time, they would come to regret their ignorance.

They'd step on a mine, end everything, and at last come to regret it.

But I was wrong.

I was a lonely kid, living in a world of my own creation, solving problems I'd invented, and patting myself on the back for it. I believed wholeheartedly that logic could trump experience, and believed that I could be happy if I wanted to.

I'd screwed up being a kid.

But the world did not end.

There was no game over.



I was insurmountably behind, no longer stood a chance in hell of winning, but life went on. There were times when I considered ending it, and I even tried a few times, but I even screwed that up.

In truth...

...I was not a bystander.

I was just a loser.

A pathetic, sad, loser.

So at some point I became less than eager to discover clear answers to questions. I wasn't reluctant to find them, not exactly, but I was apathetic.

Answers held no great meaning.

If I left things unclear...

Vague...

Uncertain.

That was fine.

Possibly preferable.

Doing things that actually changed anything was the domain of the red Humanity's Strongest, or the blue savant, people who burst out ahead of the world, the real chosen ones – it was not for me.

It was not the job of a loser...

...of a narrator.

A life spent not noticing the mines stepped on was better.

Knowing the mines were there, but pretending to have forgotten, eventually managing to actually forget – that was a better life.

I thought that was true, even though I knew it was too late, even though I knew it was a compromise, even if I was told I was just pretending to be human.

On the other side of the mirror...

I saw a version of myself that had not lost.

It seemed so simple.

He hadn't lost...

He'd merely failed.

Being a loser was better than being a psycho.

He thought the opposite.

Being a psycho was better than losing.

Both were nonsense.

Nonsense, or masterpieces.

And that was fine.

Completely fine.

One girl had asked if I'd ever considered myself defective.

Another had told me she loved me. A boy who'd told me he'd be the next to die. And you, who told me I was dense.

I understand.

It is not my role to change things...

But it is my job to end the nonsense that started because of me.

I will wrap things up neatly.

Muimi.

I stuck the lock pick knife I'd borrowed from Zerozaki in the door, and rattled it. I heard the lock click in less than a minute. I turned the knob and opened the door. The chain was fastened, so it only moved a few inches.

"....."

I hesitated a moment, then swung the knife and snapped the chain. It was more fragile than I'd imagined; the chain shattered, links scattering on the floor. One hit me in the face. I ignored it. Free of its bonds, the door opened, and I stepped inside.

The view inside left me speechless.

The wallpaper had been torn to shreds, and shattered dishes covered the floor. It seemed like a bad idea to enter barefoot, so I overcame years of habit and stepped in with my shoes on. The further in I went the worse the state of the room. Everything was broken. I felt like not one object in the apartment retained its original shape. Everything had been utterly destroyed. Clothes torn

and scattered. Furniture shattered. Books ripped apart. The table was split in half. A computer lay smashed to pieces. The carpet was filthy. Someone had punched the mirror, leaving a spiral of shattered glass from the center. The garbage can had been turned upside down. Broken light bulbs were scattered on the floor. A hamster had been drawn and quartered. The stuffing had been torn out of the mattress and pillows. Vegetables had been chopped into a puree. The refrigerator lay on its side. The air conditioner ripped open. Revolting graffiti spammed the counter. Dead tropical fish lay on the ground near a cracked fish tank. Stationary supplies snapped methodically in half, one by one. The clock no longer told the time. All the pages had been torn out of the calendar. The teddy bear had been strangled to death.

And...

"What are you doing?"

She was sitting by the window, glaring at me as if applying a curse.

Who had destroyed this room?

None other.

She had.

"Muimi."

No answer.

Her eyes just bored into me, filled with hate.

Her hair.

That long curly brown hair...

...had been brutally chopped off.

I could see strands of it lying here and there. Hair wasn't literally a woman's life, but seeing this was still freshly terrifying.

I was...

...in her realm.

There was a precarious tension in the room, like she could explode at any moment.

All molecules in the room were focused on me. Her eyes were not the only thing stabbing into me. This shattered, broken

room was itself transformed into a force of hostility, malevolence, violence, and murder, all directed at me.

"...could you tone the glare down a little?"

"Shut up," she hissed. "Why did you come here? You've got a lot of nerve."

"Don't worry. I didn't come here to save you. I'm not that nice a guy. I'm not a hero."

I brushed some of the rubble out of the way, making a space to sit down in front of her. There was a broken cell phone lying next to me.

"Oh, so that's why Sasa couldn't reach you. Which means she'll show up here eventually. We don't have all day."

".....why are you here?"

"I've figured most of it out," I said, keeping my tone neutral. I could tell it was a bad idea to rub her the wrong way, but honestly, this was the only way I knew how to talk. "At least, I imagine I have. But there are things I don't understand. I was hoping you could help, Muimi."

"....."

"I'll take your silence as agreement," I said. ".....I'm clear up until you attacked me. But why did you kill Akiharu? That's what I don't get."

"....."

"I see no reason for you to have killed him."

"HA. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha."

Muimi began laughing like her mind had just snapped. A laugh without emotion, without any mirth or conscious involvement. Like her madness was laughing for her.

Then she glared at me.

"You came here with those injuries? Are you stupid? Nobody's gonna show up to save you here. Or do you have someone waiting outside to step in?"

"Oh...no, I don't. Him showing up like that was...a fluke. Not something you need worry about."

Remembering the beating I'd taken, I brushed my thumb, the gauze on my face. My shoulders and jaw were hardly fully healed. I was not in any condition to fight.

"...I'll admit I wasn't sure at first. I mean, even with that ski mask on your hair was too long. So I thought it might not be you. But now I see you've cut your hair. Is that why you cut it?"

"Don't be stupid. That's no reason at all."

Fair enough. I shrugged.

"You're more careful than I expected," she said. "You noticed if I followed you. You live in a shithole with very thin walls; I couldn't attack you there."

"Yeah, isn't it great?"

I tried using Aikawa-style sarcasm, but it didn't really work.

"But using Mikoko's name to lure me out was hardly fair. There must have been another way."

".....don't you dare say her name," Muimi snarled. "You have no right."

"...okay."

"I don't even want to talk to you but I have to ask. Why did you reject Mikoko?"

"I didn't. I don't think."

"What!?"

Muimi slammed her fist into the wall. The whole room shook. She had not given a damn about injuring herself, just punched as hard as she could. I shivered, even though she had not tried to punch me.

It was easier dealing with a psycho...

...than someone this broken.

"Why? Why didn't you just accept her? That would have been so much easier! Why couldn't you just say yes? Why couldn't you just do that for her?"

"I asked a question first. I'd like you to answer it. I'll repeated it if you like. Why did you kill Akiharu? You had no reason to do so. Everything else makes sense, but that one thing

baffles me. I understand why you attacked me. You had good reason to. I get that. But after you attacked me, why'd you go and kill Akiharu?"

"If I tell you, will you answer my question?"

"I promise."

Muimi glared at me in silence.

For several minutes.

"It's simple," she said. "It seemed like the natural thing."

"Natural?" I said, watching her face carefully. "But he was your friend."

"He was. I loved him. But I didn't love him too much to strangle."

Not one word of that struck me as a lie.

"Being friends isn't a reason not to kill someone. It all comes down to priorities."

She really meant that.

I shut my eyes, and nodded. Priorities. Friends. Priorities. Friends. I rolled her words around in my head, searching for a response.

"Or can you say you'd never kill a friend? No matter what the reason?"

"If I thought there was a chance I'd kill them, I wouldn't call them a friend."

"Well, isn't that great," she sneered. "You hypocrite. You couldn't have applied that hypocrisy to Mikoko? Your turn to answer."

"....."

I ran what I was about to say through my head three times before answering.

"I guess...because I didn't love her."

I thought she might hit me, but she didn't move. She just glared at me. Didn't even blink.

"So," she said. "You were a coward, or dense. You were just cruel."

"So?"

"I told you." Her voice cracked. "I warned you. If you hurt her, I'd never forgive you."

I half closed my eyes, and shrugged.

"If we're talking forgiveness, what about you? I can't understand what you've done. I know what drove you to it, but I don't know if what you did really helps Mikoko."

"I told you not to say her name! Do not talk about her like you knew her! You knew nothing!" Muimi insisted. "I knew her. I know everything there was to know about Mikoko. I'd known her since grade school. I knew her better than she knew herself. The only thing I don't know was why she had to fall in love with a heartless bastard like you."

"That part's easy enough," I said.

No need to think.

I knew the answer as plain as day.

"She didn't."

"....."

"It was a mistake. An error. She was confused. Misled. Wrong. She was in love with being in love. And was no judge of character."

".....is that all you have to say?"

There was anger in her voice, raw rage she did not attempt to hide. It could erupt out of her at any moment. There was only so much longer we could sit and talk like this.

"No, there is one other thing. Something I promised Mikoko, so...I should keep that promise. Muimi..."

The final question.

The one it all came down to.

"Now that you're a murderer...can you forgive yourself?"

"What does forgiveness have to do with it!?" Muimi screamed. "I did nothing wrong! Nothing! Nothing done for Mikoko can ever be wrong! Nobody thought more about Mikoko than I did! How dare you ever talk like this to me! I did it all for

Mikoko! I'd do anything for her! Kill someone, kill myself, anything!"

"....."

For what is right. For what we believe. For what is true.

To help someone. To help a loved one.

To help a friend.

We kill people.

"I loved her! Unlike you! You can't love anyone, you have no feelings for anyone. How can you go on living? You've never done anything for someone else in your life! You have no human feelings, you defective piece of shit! Shut up!"

For someone else...

We need not hesitate. We need not doubt.

We just act.

Free of regrets.

Proud of what we do, unafraid of what others think.

Even though it's murder.

"If only you'd never existed! Then Tomoe and Mikoko and Akiharu and I would all still be alive and happy! It's all your fault! We'd been together all this time! Grade school, high school, college too, if not for you! You destroyed us!"

Because I was in the way.

Because someone was a problem, a nuisance, trouble.

Obnoxious, unstable, unpleasant.

They deserved to die.

"It was all for Mikoko! Mikoko was me and I was Mikoko! We were best friends! I'd kill my parents for her! She'd have killed you for me!"

For someone we valued...

We could kill anyone.

We could kill any number.

Dozens. Hundreds.

Ourselves. Strangers.

Our best friends.



"I did nothing wrong! I'm right! That's why I keep saying it!  
If I could travel back in time I'd do the same thing every time!  
Mikoko would forgive me!"

No getting caught up in the moment.

No being beside one's self.

Just like breathing.

Just like a psycho killer.

Just like a defective product or a human failure.

We kill.

"I...forgive myself!"

Muimi pounded her foot into the filthy floor.

".....hm," I said, watching. My eyes must have been very cold. "Is that all you have to say?"

She glared at me again.

I no longer cared.

"Good. Please...stop talking. I don't want to hear your voice, I don't want to see you again. If you'd said all you have to say, and done what you had to do, I hope you're satisfied. You're broken. There's no part of you that isn't."

".....broken? I am?"

"You did this for Mikoko? You're blaming her for it?"

"...you know nothing..."

I knew she was struggling not to throw herself at me. If I hadn't used Mikoko's name, she would have.

The thread...

...that kept her sane...

...was Aoi Mikoko.

"So..." she growled, as if her voice was rumbling up from the bowels of hell. "What about you? Don't you feel at all responsible for Mikoko's death? Answer me!"

"I don't. I feel nothing. When someone has died, that just means that person is dead."

"....."

I could see the blood draining from Muimi's face. She'd

passed beyond anger now. Even so, I didn't stop talking. The words poured out of me mechanically.

"I'm not arrogant enough to tell other people how to live their lives. The only person responsible for what people do is the person who did it. That goes for you too, Muimi."

"You...what the...? How can you think like that? That's just...creepy. Crazy. You aren't human."

"I just don't agree with the idea that we have to make other people a part of us. I did it for her...I did it for them? Waving that idea around like a pardon...it pisses me off."

Like I was looking at myself.

"I once said you and Tomoe were alike...but I take that back," Muimi said, as if she was addressing the devil. "Tomoe closed herself off from others because she was insecure...but you do it out of hostility."

I sighed dramatically. I couldn't deny it, and had no intention of trying. It was about time she worked that out. Seeing similarities in people just proved how different they were. It was obvious.

"...whatever. Do what you want. You and I have nothing to do with each other. I won't stop you. But you shouldn't have killed Akiharu, Muimi. You'll be arrested for it soon. I don't think Mikoko would have wanted that..."

"I don't care. Fuck the law. They'll arrest me. I know. But I have time. Time enough to hurt you. To kill you."

She got down on one knee so she could look me right in the eyes. There was a knife in her hand, light glinting off the blade. The same knife the shadow had used that night. The one that had narrowly missed my jugular.

"No one can stop me."

"What will happen if you kill me?"

"Who cares? At the least, you'll have paid for what you did to Mikoko."

"....."

Oh.

Muimi, you still don't get it. You keep saying you're doing this for Mikoko, you did it for Mikoko, it's all for Mikoko, but that's just an excuse, an explanation, a lie.

So what is driving you?

Simple jealousy. You're jealous of me.

Ordinary regret. The things you and Mikoko could have, would have, should have.

Tedious guilt. Directed at your own self.

That's all.

"Enough nonsense, Muimi," I said, ignoring the knife. "What? Continue what we started? You're gonna beat me? Hurt me? Make me suffer? And then kill me?"

"Yes."

"Oh?"

With my left hand...

...I grabbed my index finger.

"Like what? You're gonna break this finger?"

I yanked my finger backwards, snapping the bone.

It sounded...

Like I was breaking a twig.

Muimi's expression was one of frozen surprise.

The pain was overwhelming, enough to drive me insane, but I didn't let it show. I just showed her the broken finger.

"Satisfied?"

"....."

"No, this isn't nearly enough. You wouldn't be satisfied with this. You hate me so, so, so much you would never let me off with just one finger broken. It's all for Mikoko, so who cares about morals, or the law, or common sense."

That shook her.

The first time I'd seen a crack in her emotions.

I didn't care.

"Next, how about my middle finger?"

I took a good grip on it.  
Like I was grabbing a doll.  
A doll had no nerves.  
A doll had no heart.  
So you could break it easily.  
Snap.

"And then the ring finger!"  
I twisted my ring finger the wrong way.  
Crack.

"Finally, the pinky!"  
It bent impossibly.  
Crunch.

"Now my right hand is completely destroyed. There's no way I can fight back now."

Muimi was white as a sheet, gasping. It looked less like fear than panic. Primal revulsion in the face of what could not be understood. A fatal wound of an emotion that blew away all her anger.

"Shall we try for the left?"

I touched the tips of my fingers to the floor.  
And then put my weight on them, like I was punching the floor.

Snapsnapsnapsnap.

Four pleasant little pops.

"We can keep twisting them, if you like."

Crack. Crackcrackcrackcrack.

"And then we can put both hands together, and..."

"Wh-what are you doing!?" Muimi shrieked. She threw the knife aside, and grabbed my wrists. "Are you fucking crazy? What are you thinking?"

"Doing what you wanted to do for you. This is the same as if you did it. Or the same as if Mikoko did it. If things work the way you say."

I waggled my twisted mess of fingers in front of her eyes. It

was too gross for anyone sane to look directly at, I guess; Muimi instantly averted her gaze.

"D-doesn't it hurt!?"

"Dunno," I said, as if it didn't. "That's not really the point, here, is it? No matter how much someone hurts me or hits me I don't feel anything. If you want to kill me, go ahead and kill me. Do what you like. Death, to me, is a release. Nothing more."

"What...?"

"I'm getting pretty sick of everything. Living. People close to me, people not close to me, every thought in the world, every thought not in the world. You, Mikoko, and of course, myself. It's all so irritating. I'm fed up. Life is pain. Nothing here holds value for me. The world could be destroyed tomorrow, I could be destroyed today, and I wouldn't care – I'd be glad. Killing me has no meaning. If you'd killed me the other night, that would have suited me just fine."

".....!"

"If you killed me, I'm sure you'd be satisfied. But that wouldn't be revenge, or justice, or devotion to a friend. It would just be you letting off steam. Just getting rid of stress. You'll feel much better. When you hurt me, you'll stop feeling so jealous of me. When I suffer, you'll forget your regrets. When you kill me, you'll just be trying to get rid of all that guilt."

"No!" Muimi grabbed her head, shaking it hysterically. "No, no, no, no! Don't lie to me! Don't try and trick me! Nothing you say is true! I did it for Mikoko!"

"Then go ahead and kill me. Kill me with your own hands. The world won't change one bit."

Do it for yourself.

Don't claim it's for anyone else.

Make no excuses or rationalizations.

Kill me of your own free will.

Sin for no gain.

"Unnnnggg.....aaaaaaarrggh!"

Muimi picked up the knife, face twisted with loathing, eyes like demon's, listed twisted in the shape of a curse. She grabbed my throat with all her might, and violently stabbed the knife just far enough forward to touch the skin over my jugular.

Then she hesitated, waved, dithered, faltered.

"....unnnnnnnngggg!"

And...

Kept on hesitating.

"....."

I closed my eyes.

And let time pass.

Eventually I got bored.

"Why is it," I said, pushing her hand away, moving the knife aside, and standing up. I looked down at her, and stretched. "Why is nobody can do something for themselves anymore?"

A sense of duty. A sense of justice.

A sense of camaraderie. Or simple friendship.

"That's all nonsense, isn't it?"

Muimi didn't answer. I wasn't sure I should really be asking. I'd never done anything for myself, much less for anyone else. I'd never done anything for anyone.

"Then what should I do?" Muimi said, looking to me for help. "What can I do for Mikoko? I have to do something for her. What are you telling me to do?"

Why would you ask me that?

That thought led straight to a dead end.

Doing something for others was nothing but a happy delusion. Now that you know that, there's nothing you can do. You're as doomed as I am, as Tomoe was. Nothing lay before you but darkness and emptiness, no hope of mere despair.

You were finished.

But we both knew that only too well, and so I said nothing. Perhaps she did not know that yet -- in which case, I wasn't about to tell her.

"Truth is," I said, turning my back on her. "I came here expecting you to kill me. I came here so you could kill me. You wanted to kill me, I wanted someone to kill me, seemed like it might work out. Seemed like it would end things on a high note. But I changed my mind. I'm not gonna let someone like you kill me."

"...then..." she said. Not looking up.

I looked away from her, and headed for the door.

All the strings sustaining her seemed to snap, and she sobbed, her voice ripping out of her.

"Then kill me!"

"Fuck no. Kill yourself."

I didn't turn around.

What would be the point?

## 2

"Yo! You done?" Zerozaki said, detaching himself from a telephone pole as I exited Muimi's apartment building.

"Yep," I said, walking straight past him, without stopping.

"Cool," he said, keeping pace at my side. "Aw, shit, man! Your hands! What the...? Is it my imagination, or do you have nine times the broken fingers you went in with?"

"Yup."

"She broke all of them? Eeee, who is this Atemiya lady? Nenbutsu no Tetsu?"

"No, I broke them all myself."

"What are you, stupid? Come to think of it, you broke your own thumb, too. Are you...a masochist? Are you? Or do you feel no pain? Is this a special condition of some kind? Have you ever had a lobotomy?"

"No, it hurts like hell. Hurts too much to pass out. I could start crying at any minute. I'm actually walking towards the nearest hospital right now. Saiin Hospital's probably closest. And no, I'm not a masochist. I just thought a little shock therapy might help."

"You know they can't always make broken fingers work

properly again, right? You may never play baseball again."

"Then I'll play soccer."

"Liar," Zerozaki said, sighing. "So...how'd it go?"

"Meh. Nothing left to do but wrap up. Sasa and Kazuhito's territory. They'll handle it. Muimi will be arrested, and the truth will come out. That's all there is to it."

Whether Muimi would still be sane or not was another question.

Or whether she was still alive.

Zerozaki folded his hands behind his head, looking bored. "Not what you'd call dramatic. You ought to at least try for something more romantic."

"But this is real."

"Yeah, I guess. Do you have like, parents?"

Zerozaki's question might appear to be a sudden change of topic, but I'd expected him to ask something like that, so I was not surprised.

"I do. In Kobe. I think they're alive and well."

"Hunh. Are you grateful to them?"

"Um?"

"I mean, what do you feel...towards them?"

"About what?"

"About them bringing you into this world."

"...what about you, Zerozaki? If there's any point in asking."

"It's pretty obvious."

"Yes. Obvious."

We looked at each other.

"I'm sorry" "I was ever born."

"Always did like Dazai better than Akutagawa," Zerozaki laughed.

"I always liked Mushanokoji best," I didn't laugh.

"What about Kikuchi Kan? I kinda dig him."

"Haven't read him. Never been a big reader."

"Oh, right, you said. Hmm," Zerozaki nodded sagely. "So



can I get that knife back? That type's pretty hard to come by."

"Oh, this knife? Can I ask a favor, Zerozaki? Can I keep this? It comes in handy. Can open any lock without any skill."

"Shit's expensive! Or do you have 1,500,000 yen on you?"

"Jesus! How can anything cost that much?"

"Look, I didn't make it."

"Can I get a hundred and fifty year installment plan?"

"We'll never see each other again."

"Oh, right."

No help for it. I reluctantly handed the knife back to Zerozaki. He took the grip, spun it around his hand, and slotted it into his vest. Apparently he had blades hidden all over his body. What would happen if he fell down?

"So I know it doesn't really matter, but there were a few things I was curious about. If you don't mind a pop quiz."

"What about?"

"If I remember correctly Atemiya had an alibi for both Emoto and Aoi's deaths. She was at karaoke for Emoto's, and with her sister for Aoi's. Maybe she's got nothing for Usami, but how'd she kill the first two? And how'd you know she killed him after talking to the cops for like, two minutes? It seemed like you already knew it was her attacked you in Kamogawa Park. Why'd you think she was the killer in the first place? When did you first start to suspect her?"

"Um, it's kind of hard to explain..."

He cocked his head, puzzled. "Like, what? Just a hunch? Or...everyone else was dead so it had to be her? Like this is Kindaichi."

"No, but...do I have to explain? It'll get all logicy."

"I can deal. You asked a bunch of shit about what I was up to, so it seems only fair. Gift for my trip to hell."

"To hell? You planning on dying?"

"I might die? This red monster's after me."

That did seem likely. Aikawa could appear right this second

and it would be only natural. Zerozaki's life was like a candle in the wind.

"Right, what do you want to know?"

"Just start at the beginning. How'd you know Atemiya killed Emoto, Aoi, and Usami, and attacked you?"

"You've already got it wrong," I said. "Muimi didn't kill Tomoe or Mikoko. That's why she's got an alibi."

"Wait, what?" Zerozaki gaped at me.

"Muimi only killed Akiharu. Although she did attack me, too. She didn't do anything else...although she's unlikely to get her deposit back."

"Back the fuck up," Zerozaki said, stepping in front of me. He put his hands on my shoulders. There was a smile on his face, but he wasn't smiling. "A few hours ago, you said – with utter confidence – that, 'The person who killed Emoto Tomoe, Aoi Mikoko, Usami Akihiro, and the person who attacked me in Kamogawa Park' was 'Obviously Atemiya Muimi.'" Right?"

"Yeah," I said. "But the reason I said that with utter confidence was to sell the lie. I didn't want to get into a long explanation, so I stretched things a bit. The truth is a bit more complicated."

"You know I've spent the last few hours going, 'How the heck did Atemiya kill those two? Hmmmmmm...?'"

"I told you I'm a liar."

"God, I want to kill you."

With that unnerving whisper, he moved back beside me. I took a step to the side, putting a little distance between us.

"...okay, so let's rephrase the question. Who *did* kill Emoto? If it wasn't Atemiya, who was it?"

"Aoi Mikoko."

Zerozaki did not appear to be all that surprised. He frowned a little, his tattoo twisting, but not much more.

"...okay, so who killed Aoi Mikoko? It's not gonna be *you* or something, is it?"

"No. That was just a suicide."

".....a suicide?" This time Zerozaki was visibly shocked. "Aoi killed herself?"

"Yup. That's why the security cameras didn't capture anyone suspicious. There wasn't anyone to catch. Muimi snapped after Mikoko killed herself. That's why she killed Akiharu and attacked me. But I didn't want to die, so I preempted her next attack. QED."

"I don't think that's how you use QED," Zerozaki said, then scratched his head. "Wait, wait, let's go in order. We can't start by wrapping everything up, it makes no sense."

"Okay, from the beginning. Um, with Mikoko killing Tomoe?"

"Yeah. No, wait, you're the one provided her god damn alibi! You...and your neighbor. You aren't telling me you were in cahoots?"

"No. Why am I a suspect in all your hypotheticals? She tricked me. I bought it, too, at least for that night. Miiko as well. Maybe less 'tricked' than just 'didn't notice'?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. Mikoko killed Tomoe. If you know that, it narrows things down a bit, right?"

"Mm..." He thought for a moment. "The two of you left Emoto's apartment together, right? Then you got a call from Emoto near Nishioji Nakadachiuri. You went to your place, then you foisted her off on your neighbor, Asano. Aoi woke up the next morning, stopped by your room, then went to Emoto's...so she must have killed her the next morning, when she discovered the body."

"Not possible. They confirmed the time of death. She was definitely killed the previous evening."

"Did she sneak out in the middle of the night? From Asano's room?"

"Impossible. Miiko's super sensitive to noise, and would have caught her. And Miiko has no reason to cover for Mikoko."

"Then some sort of ranged trick? If this was a closed room

or something, maybe, but with strangulation, tricks aren't gonna happen."

"Which leaves one answer."

"What? Does it have anything to do with this X/Y business?"

"No. That's not worth thinking about. That's just like extra fries at the bottom of the bag. You can ignore it."

"Look, just tell me, you procrastinating son of a bitch."

"It's simple. After we left her apartment, Mikoko had no way of getting to Tomoe. So she must have killed her before we left."

"...hunh? How's that work?" Zerozaki looked confused. "That fucks up the rest of the timeline. It leaves Emoto calling you *after* she was killed."

"Imagine that phone call didn't happen," I said. "If it weren't for that call, could Mikoko have killed Tomoe?"

"Nope. You left at the same time."

"We left the building together, but...we didn't necessarily leave the *room* together. There was a few second lag there. I left Tomoe's room a few seconds before Mikoko."

".....?"

"We've got to put our shoes on, right? When we leave. I had my back to the room while I did that. I was looking at my shoes, oblivious to what Mikoko and Tomoe were doing." I raised a leg, showing Zerozaki my shoe. "In fact, there's a door between the main room and the entrance. Even if I'd looked behind me, I wouldn't have seen a thing."

"But like...screams? Thumps? You can't just not notice someone being killed in the next room."

"Not if she'd been stabbed or beaten to death. But she was strangled, so no screaming. There were sounds. But how was I to know those were the sounds of murder? I just assumed Mikoko had stubbed her toe or something."

Zerozaki pressed his fingers to his temple. The gesture

reminded me of Nose Seiko, but he didn't really look like her at all, so I'm not sure why it did.

"Wait, does putting your shoes on take like, ten or twenty minutes? I really doubt that. Even if you're right here, and Aoi did strangle Emoto, she wouldn't die that quick. People can live for ten minutes without breathing."

"Zerozaki, you being a knife-focused psycho killer may have left you acting on incomplete information. Strangling someone doesn't lead to death by suffocation. It cuts off the flow of blood to the brain. That kills them. You just pull upwards, like you're hanging them. Once you get the jugular pinched it takes less than a minute. If you do it right, it can be over in even less."

"...really?"

"Yes. That's what happened. Mikoko opened the door like nothing had happened, and joined me in the entrance. Mikoko's body blocked the view, so I didn't see inside. We left Tomoe's room, and went outside."

"Okay, that all makes sense," Zerozaki said, clearly not satisfied. "But this is if the phone call didn't happen. Except it *did*. Emoto called out a few minutes after you left her apartment, so she must have been alive. I know you're not trying to claim she came back to life for a few seconds and then died again."

"That is a nonsensical theory. Of course not. Emoto was already dead. Which makes it simple. Very simple. Think about it. The phone call was for me, but it wasn't my phone she called."

"...yeah, it was Aoi's. But that's because she didn't have your number."

"Let's look at the basics here. What's the benefit of having a cell phone? People can call you wherever you are, right? Likewise, there's no proof that call came from inside Tomoe's room. Also, the thing about phones is you never actually see the person you're talking to."

"...so someone was working with Aoi? And they used Emoto's phone call, and pretended to be her?"

"No accomplices. This was impulsive crime. Going by the murder weapon, anyway."

"The murder weapon? A thin strip of cloth?"

"Yeah, the ribbon on the present Akiharu gave Tomoe. Ribbons are actually pretty effective as far as strangling people goes. They're soft, and can pull tight against the flesh. Much better than rope. But based on the fact that she didn't prepare a weapon ahead of time, but just grabbed something handy, I'm guessing she didn't have a plan."

"So who made the phone call?"

"She didn't need help with that. Mikoko did it herself," I said. "She slipped Tomoe's phone into her pocket, and dialed her own number from it. Of course, Tomoe didn't actually say anything, but Mikoko just pretended she was. Then she handed the phone off to me."

"But she did talk to you? She said she had something she forgot to say."

"Yeah, but...that was Mikoko. I was walking a few steps ahead of her. Just like in the apartment. I couldn't see that she was whispering into Tomoe's phone. By the time I turned around, she'd hidden it in her pocket again."

The way she killed Tomoe...

And the way she gave herself an alibi...

Both highly risky. If I had so much as glanced over my shoulder, for any reason, she'd have been caught red handed. But the odds of that were reasonably low. Failure put her in a very bad position, but the odds of success were fairly high. If we're talking worth here, it was certainly worth doing, given the lack of better alternatives and the improvised nature of it all.

"Anyway, now she had an alibi. The next day she went to Tomoe's room, returned the phone, and call the police. They'll suspect the person who discovered the body, of course, but she had an alibi, and she probably hid the murder weapon in her own place on her way to Tomoe's."

Details like that were known only to Mikoko. We were unable to ask her about them now. But the gist of it was correct. Even if I was off on one or two things it was well within the margin of error, and acceptable to describe as the truth.

Mikoko had probably written the X/Y thing the next morning, when she'd found the body. She didn't have the time the previous night, and probably wouldn't have thought of it.

"When you explain it like that, it does sound like Aoi was the killer. But just because it was possible for her to do it, doesn't prove that she was."

"Yeah, you're right," I let him have that point. "Truth is, I have no proof. I mean, it might have been a robbery."

".....do you have like, no principles?"

"Whatever. That's basically my thoughts on Tomoe's murder. Any questions?"

"Mm..." he made a show of thinking, almost said something, couldn't quite find the words, and finally gave up. "Let's move on to Aoi's death. How was that a suicide? The police are sure it was a murder."

"That gets a bit complicated. As for why she killed herself, that's easy enough. Pangs of conscience over having killed Tomoe."

"...do murderers have pangs of conscience?"

"Not all of them are like you," I said, making it sound like a joke. "At the least, that's what she wrote in her note."

"Oh, well, if she left a note...then I guess that is why she chose death. I don't get it. Suicide? I guess there are all kinds of murderers. But if you were gonna do that, why kill in the first place? ...wait."

"What?"

"What do mean, note?"

"It's a fairly common practice for suicides to leave a note explaining what drove them to it. Not to be confused with a will."

"Thanks, Columbo."

He kicked my hand. Since all my fingers were broken this

hurt like hell.

"What the fuck? What if they can't set the bones properly?"

"Then play soccer. I meant, what fucking note? This is the first I've heard of it."

"Yeah, well...first, think about it, Zerozaki. Doesn't it strike you as strange?"

"Doesn't what?"

"Obviously..."

Even Sasa...

...had pointed this out.

"We're talking me, here."

I'd been broken long ago.

I was a human failure.

I didn't have anything approaching an acceptable nerve.

I had nothing but love for death's embrace.

"Would I really feel that sick just because I found a friend of mine strangled to death?"

"...oh. So...because it was a suicide, and not a murder...you felt super sick?"

"No! Dead bodies don't make me feel a thing no matter how they die."

"....."

"I went to Mikoko's apartment, rang the bell. No answer. I thought, 'Shit,' and went in. You know what I saw? Mikoko's body, dead. She had strangled herself."

This...

...was why Mikoko had been strangled from the front, while Tomoe had been strangled from behind.

"She strangled herself? Is that even possible?"

"Apparently it's surprisingly common. But in this case she wasn't able to tie off the arteries, only her breathing. It would have been very painful. Her face was bloodshot. I wouldn't call it an attractive way to die."

People would not chose this way to die...



...unless they were very determined.

In this case...

Aoi Mikoko had made up her mind.

"There was a note lying next to her on the bed. Addressed to me. It said a lot of things, but...among them were the fact that she'd killed Tomoe, and what she wanted me to do."

"...she wanted you to do something?"

"She didn't want people to think it was a suicide. She didn't mind dying, but she didn't want people to think she'd been a horrible person who'd murdered her friend."

"...not seeing the point here. Get specific."

"She asked me to destroy the evidence. The lanyard she'd stolen from the scene of the crime, the note, the ribbon she'd killed herself and Tomoe with. Etc."

"Oh, I get it," Zerozaki said, looking up. "It's all starting to fall into place. You did as she asked. Come to think of it, there was something odd. You left the house at eleven, got to Aoi's in ten minutes, waited ten minutes for the cops, then were at the police station for ten minutes, and suddenly it was noon. Thirty minutes unaccounted for. So that's where they went?"

"Right. There were all those cameras in the hall so I couldn't leave the room, and I had to call the cops. So what do you think I did?"

"You said they searched you when you left so...did you...eat it?"

I nodded.

Anyone would have figured that much out.

So of course Zerozaki Hitoshiki did.

"You ate it?"

"It was delicious," I said. "Apparently the proper jargon for people who do that is 'stuffer.' Be that as it may, I can't really keep things down that I can't digest. I was fighting the urge to throw up even as I called the cops. I planned to try and keep it down till I got home, but couldn't make it and wound up throwing up in the police

station bathroom."

"You ate all the evidence..." Zerozaki gazed at me in wonder. "Even the ribbon? The murder weapon? You ate something that had killed two people? That's fucking insane!"

"Yeah, I certainly didn't claim otherwise."

"Why'd you bother doing what she asked? Just blow that shit off. Don't have to cross lines that shouldn't be crossed."

"Yeah...well, I guess I felt a little guilty about it. Wanted to pay her back for it somehow." I avoided his gaze. "So that's the truth of Aoi Mikoko's death. It should have all ended with her suicide, but..."

"The case unexpectedly continued?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "That...I didn't expect."

"So why the hell did Atemiya kill Usami?"

"I can only guess. I had nothing to do with it, after all. But I think I'm right. It's not that unusual a murder, after all. Muimi didn't buy Mikoko's death. Maybe Mikoko told her what she was planning on. Either way, Muimi knew Mikoko had killed Tomoe, and then killed herself."

"OK."

"So then what?"

For someone else...

For someone other than yourself...

"What could she do for Mikoko? What would you do, Zerozaki?"

"Nothing. Aoi's already dead."

This was true.

Zerozaki wouldn't do anything for someone alive, either. I wouldn't. That was all there was to it.

"But Muimi wanted to do something. First, she wanted revenge. Second, she wanted to protect Mikoko."

"So she tried to kill you for the first. Because you rejected Aoi? I was right about that, wasn't I? Aoi was in love with you."

"Don't be so proud of yourself. I'd figured that much out

myself, really."

"You'd figured it out and chosen to ignore it? Man, you deserve to get murdered. But how did she go about trying to protect Mikoko? How does killing Usami accomplish that?"

"Same as what I did. She was trying to protect Mikoko's reputation. In other words...if a third murder happens, then nobody will suspect that the second victim was the original murderer. Nobody would know Mikoko killed her friend."

"...let's accept that for a minute. Why Usami? It could have been anyone. Why kill a friend?"

"Because he was a friend. Tomoe, then Mikoko, and the next victim is some total stranger? They might not even consider the murders connected. The only real candidates were Usami Akiharu and me. Or just me. I know what you're thinking, Zerozaki. She should have just killed me. You're right. But I don't live in that antique apartment building for shits and giggles. There are few places harder to get murdered in."

Thin walls, noisy floors.

It was impossible to sneak about, struggle, or kill someone.

"So Usami was her second best option? But...Aoi was Atemiya's friend, sure, but so was he! Doesn't that matter?"

"That was what I wanted to know. I mean, Tomoe was Muimi's friend, too. How could she forgive Mikoko for murdering her friend? So I asked. And Muimi said it was a matter of priorities. In other words, even dead, Mikoko mattered more than Akiharu did alive. Murdered Mikoko mattered more than innocent victim Tomoe. As far as Muimi was concerned."

"The whole thing sucks. I feel more sorry for Usami, though."

"You might be right..."

He had predicted his own death. He'd made sure he had nothing left unfinished. I wondered how much he'd really understood. I had no way of knowing. No way of guessing. It seemed too romantic to suggest that Akiharu had known

everything, and let Muimi kill him. But if that was true, then he was one person in this mess I respected.

It meant...

...he'd accepted everything about his friends.

Zerozaki posed for Rodin for a while, but finally unfolded his arms and looked up.

"I understand the logic, but I have the same question I had with Aoi. All of this works based on the assumption that Atemiya did it. Aoi left a note, so that explains that. But with Atemiya we're left with Kindaichi deductions. You figured it out over the phone, with no evidence. Only way that works is if you and Atemiya are the only ones left alive."

"...do you hate Yokomizu or something?"

He certainly seemed to have a remarkable amount of hostility towards Kindaichi.

Zerozaki shook his head. "The covers are too scary, I've only seen the TV versions. Don't have a real opinion on them."

"Okay..."

"So was that it?"

"No. Remember, I did ask Sasa a question."

"Right. You asked about the X/Y thing. But didn't you just say that didn't have anything to do with anything?"

"It doesn't mean anything. At this point it's nothing but a symbol. The only time it meant anything was at Tomoe's. It makes no sense for that to be left at the scene of Akiharu's murder."

"Why not?"

"The fact that a message like that was left at the scene was a secret. Only the police knew about it. Sasa didn't say anything about it. The only reason we knew about it was because we broke in. And the people I asked if they had any idea what it meant."

In other words, Aikawa, Mikoko, and Muimi. Nobody else knew.

"Other people knew. The police..."

"Yeah, sure, plenty of other people, but only Muimi thought

it was a dying message."

"Right, the police thought it was a note left by the killer, not the victim. So what?"

"Sasa told me that the message at Akiharu's scene appeared to have been left by the victim. For the first time. The killer had forced the victim to write it before killing them so that it would look like a third murder."

"And unless you think it's a dying message, you wouldn't do that. But Atemiya didn't know what X/Y meant?"

"Probably not."

If she'd known what it meant, she wouldn't have used it, no matter how badly she wanted to make the deaths look connected.

"So that's all you needed to know it was her?"

"Yeah. I mean, there was some guess work involved too. It seemed like something she would do. Even I was impressed by how much Muimi valued her friendship with Mikoko."

"Liar," Zerozaki cackled. "I can't believe anything you say! You say you're a bystander, but you're just a liar."

"I said as much."

"Don't try and own it now."

"Fair enough," I let it slide. "No more questions? We all done?"

"No much of a grand finale, but now that I've heard the whole story, it's...well..."

"A masterpiece?"

"Nah. Nonsense."

He sounded like he'd just heard a really terrible joke.

I felt the same.

It was grotesque, twisted, horrific, farcical, preposterous, ridiculous, unwatchable.

Yet...

...you had to think on it.

No matter how hard you tried not to...

...your brain kept coming back to it.

Who was at fault? What went wrong?

The answer was probably simple. Something anyone can understand, anyone can sympathize with, anyone can emphasize with, something close to home.

Which is why we rejected it.

Pretended not to understand.

Did our best to feign disinterest.

"I won't ask for the gritty details," Zerozaki said, looking away, like he'd grown tired of my company. "The more I ask the more evasive you'll become. So forget it."

"Didn't expect you to give up that easily."

"I have plans of my own. But let me ask one thing, master of nonsense."

"What, psycho killer?"

"What's your take on it?"

"On what?"

"Three people died. How does that make you feel?"

He suddenly seemed very interested. Fascinated.

Gleefully peering into the mirror, like an innocent boy.

"Murdering a friend, killing herself, killing for a friend, being killed for a friend, nearly getting killed yourself...how does all of that make you feel?"

"....."

I couldn't see myself ever asking a question that on the nose.

I folded my arms, pretending to think about it, trying to buy some time, but my fingers were broken and folding my arms didn't go so well.

"Zerozaki, here's what I think about the whole chain of events."

"Tell me."

"I've been talking too much. My fingers and throat both hurt."

"....."

Zerozaki stopped in his tracks. His eyes twitched a moment,

then he burst out laughing.

"Of course!" he said. "You mean your friends have died, and you don't give a damn?"

"No, I think I'd be pretty upset if a friend died. I just wasn't friends with any of them yet."

The one I'd been closest to was Emoto Tomoe...

...but whatever connection I'd felt there...

...made her the most distant of all.

I couldn't return Aoi Mikoko's affection with any affection of my own, and Atemiya Muimi's aggressive emotions were completely foreign to me.

I did not share Usami Akihiro's grace.

"You need more freedom."

"That's not true."

"It is. You're tying yourself down."

"Better than being tied down by others. What does freedom really mean, Zerozaki? Does freedom mean killing people to you?"

"Hmm...what *does* it mean?" Zerozaki sniggered. "Truth is, I've never been a big fan of the word. Hate it. Makes my skin crawl."

"I don't care for it either."

"It's a cheap word. At least, in this country. They just throw it around anywhere. Like it's an excuse. You have the freedom to dye your hair, as long as you dye it brown. Fuckwads. I basically do whatever the hell I want, and I don't give a damn about freedom. I just don't want to let anyone else tie me down, or tie myself down."

"I see," I said, and sighed. "If I had less patience, I'd have ended up like you."

"And if I'd been more patient, I'd have ended up like you?"

That...

...wasn't...

"That's the last thing I'd want."

"Same here."

Zerozaki laughed. I didn't.

Our conversation carried us all the way to the hospital. We'd stopped outside and carried on talking. I hadn't even noticed, but obviously, we'd talked too much.

We talked about things unrelated to the murders.

Things that only mattered to the two of us.

For two hours.

We spoke of things of no use in life. Things that neither harmed nor helped the world.

Sometimes Zerozaki led.

Sometimes I did.

If we had three wishes, what would we wish for. If we found a hundred million yen, what would we buy. Which was more beautiful, an isosceles triangle or an equilateral one. Which was bigger, a kilometer or a kilogram. Would we rather join the Golden Dawn or the Rosicrucians. Whether it was possible to make a magic circle on a 115x115 grid. How Othello would work if you used 88 squares instead of 64.

Like we were friends.

But I wasn't Zerozaki's friend...

...and he wasn't mine.

We were both talking to ourselves.

About nothing in particular.

We didn't enjoy it.

We didn't find it boring.

We were looking back...

...on the nineteen years we'd lived.

Reflected light.

Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

Time that would not normally have passed.

But that hour hand of that magic clock...

...was swiftly nearing zero.

At last Zerozaki said, "Well, I guess all my questions are answered...shall we call it good-bye?"

"Yeah," I said. I had no arguments.



"Decent way to pass the time," Zerozaki said, rising from the railing he'd been sitting on. "You planning on sticking around in Kyoto?"

"Hard to say. I'm not really the type to put down roots. I'll stay around till I'm done with college, but who knows how long I'll bother going."

"Anywhere in the world you're pretty sure you'll never go?"

"Sure. North Pole, South Pole, all kinds of places." I thought about it. There was another answer. "I definitely don't ever want to go back to America. Particularly Texas. Especially Houston. I'd rather have every bone in my body broken."

"Okay," Zerozaki said. "Then I'll go there."

"Do you speak any English?"

"I was in school through junior high. If I can't make myself understood, I'll let my knives do the talking. After all," Zerozaki grinned. "Your knives don't do much cutting."

I shrugged off the barb in that last line.

"Then I guess we won't see each other again."

"That's fine with me. Can't say it was the most pleasant experience."

"True."

We would never meet again. I did not want to see Zerozaki again, and he felt the same. Meeting at all had been an unlikely coincidence, once not likely to repeat.

I had one last question.

One that made me look deep inside myself, at the darkest part of my heart.

"Zerozaki."

"Yeah?"

"Is there anyone you love?"

"Course not! Although the one I hate the most is myself. Or maybe you. What of it?"

"There is someone I love."

He looked mildly surprised.

Then grinned like he'd gotten away with it.

"I asked you that before. You said you didn't know."

"I lied."

"Then," he said. "That's the difference between us."

"Yeah."

"Keep living that way. Don't become like me."

"Same for you."

Zerozaki turned his back on me and headed off towards Imadegawa. I turned my back on him and headed for the hospital reception.

Neither of us said anything.

But we were thinking the same thing.

"So..."

This is where the story ends for me.

But I knew at least two people who would not let it end there, not if it caused the destruction of one or two worlds inside the mirror. This depressed me.

It was a form of karma, really.

"Life is like that, human failure," said the defective product.  
To himself.

Final Chapter:  
The World That Can't Quite End

Kunagisa Tomo  
????

They put casts on all my fingers except the left thumb. The doctor told me to take it easy for two weeks, after which I should be healed enough to resume normal life.

The day after, I went to Kunagisa's apartment building, in a wealthy district of Kyoto called Shiroasaki. I'd planned to ride up like a boss on the Vespa Mikoko left me, but with my hands covered in casts, that wasn't an option. I would have to enjoy the Vespa later.

The casts were even worse than I'd thought. I'd assumed not being able to bend my fingers wouldn't be that big a deal, but after a night with it I was starting to notice just how many things it affected. Changing clothes was extremely difficult. The number of things I was going to have to bug my neighbor with was going to get insane. I was now very worried about the near future.

My only means of transport was on foot. A three hour walk was pretty rough in my condition, so I considered taking the bus or a cab, but the hospital bill had not exactly been small, so I decided to be thrifty.

"At least I know she'll be here."

At last I reached Shiroasaki, and Kunagisa's apartment. It was less an apartment building than a fortress, made of elegant brick. Kunagisa Tomo occupied the entirety of both the 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> floor.

The boulder-like security guards sitting like boulders in the entrance hall mutely watched me walk past (they knew my face by now.) The elevator was waiting for me. I pressed the button, the doors opened, and I stepped inside. I had to open a panel with a key to even see the buttons for the 31<sup>st</sup> and 32<sup>nd</sup> floors; I pushed the latter.

For a minute, gravity felt wrong.

When the elevator stopped, I stepped off, and moved over to the iron plate door opposite. It hardly seemed fair to compare her place with mine, but hers also lacked an intercom. Very few people ever visited Kunagisa, so she had no need for one.

I used my key and the fingerprint scanner to unlock the door, and stepped inside.

"Tomo! It's me. I'm coming in!"

I went down the hardwood floors of the corridor (although I was reluctant to call it a corridor. It was significantly larger than my room.) The floor below us had had all the walls ripped out, and the entire place filled with an absurdly large computer; the 32<sup>nd</sup> floor was like a giant maze, and given my bad memory, I generally got lost. Kunagisa must be here somewhere.

Maybe I should have called ahead, but my fingers weren't really up to dialing a phone. My left thumb could still move, so I suppose I could have managed it with that, but I couldn't be bothered.

"Tomo! Where are you?"

I called out as I picked my way down the hall. There were wires and cords coiled all over the place, snaking back and forth across the floor to no apparent purpose. I had been here any number of times, but I knew nothing about mechanical or electronic engineering, so this might as well have been a magical kingdom. If I moved carelessly I would trip and fall, so moving at all required my full attention.

"Tomo, it's me! I know you're here somewhere!"

"Yeah, over here! This way!"

That was not Kunagisa's voice.

This voice was more...red.

"....."

Obviously, voices don't have colors.

".....I was hoping she wouldn't be here."

But life didn't go that smoothly.

I headed in the direction of the voices, and found myself in an empty room about ten tatami sized. The apartment was so hilariously large that even Kunagisa had been unable to fill it, and little clearings of disused space remained here and there amidst the electronic jungle. Some suspected they too would be filled in time.

But without these little pseudo rooms there would be nowhere for her to receive company.

"sup," Aikawa said.

"Wowowowow, Ii-chan!" Kunagisa Tomo cried, almost spilling her can of Coke.

Her hair was a striking Hawaiian Blue. Her frame was small, child-like. Her smile 100% pure. It had been too long since I'd last seen her. Since Golden Week, nearly a month. It felt even longer.

Like I'd returned to where I belonged.

Like this was my home.

"Wowowow, Ii-chan, your hands! What happened!? Did they get fat?"

"My skin's petrified. It's the notoriously rare Adolescent Skin Petrification Syndrome."

"Oh, that explains it."

"No, it doesn't! Nah, I just ran into a little trouble. These and my face should be back to normal in a couple of weeks."

"Ha ha ha, wow, bad ass, Ii-chan da pimp! You look like you got got by Nenbutsu no Tetsu."

"Nobody got that joke the first time."

I took stock of where the two of them were sitting, then sat in a position that would form an isosceles triangle. I turned my eyes towards the source of all fear.

"...hi, Jun."

"How's it going, protagonist?"

Aikawa tossed back a swig of cola. Her grin looked as evil as ever. But she appeared to be in a better mood than I'd expected. She was as moody as the mountains, so this might not last.

"What brings you to Kunagisa's secret lair? More questions about the serial killer?"

"Nah, I'm done with that. The serial killer case is taken care of."

"It is?"

"Yep," she nodded.

"We were just talking about it, Ii-chan! You wanna join in? Three heads are hotter than two."

"I'm not that interested."

I lied.

Had Zerozaki not made it to America? Maybe Aikawa had caught him at the airport, and finished him off. That would be a shame. Riding off into the sunset only to die as soon as it was dark. That's just too sad for words, Zerozaki Hitoshiki.

"...hey, Kunagisa," Aikawa said. "This is your house and all, but do you mind leaving us alone for a bit? Ii-chan and I need to talk."

"Mm?" Kunagisa Tomo crooked her head. "Secrets?"

"Yup."

"Okay then."

She stood up and dashed out of the room. I'm sure she went straight into some room and started tinkering with her computers. I might only be able to entertain myself with chess problems, but Kunagisa had innumerable ways to pass the time.

Left alone with Aikawa, I said, "You had to get rid of her?"

"I did. You won't talk about anything serious in front of her, will you?" she replied, without a trace of guilt. "You should be grateful, not angry. You do lose your cool where she's concerned."

"Then we could save it for a later occasion."

"No, I'm much too busy. I've got to be in Hokkaido tomorrow. Headed straight there from here. I didn't think I'd get a chance to see you."

I cursed my luck.

"Okay," I said, giving up. You couldn't defeat her with mere logic. "What do you want to talk about?"

"First, let me catch you up on Zerozaki," Aikawa said. "You're curious, aren't you? Don't tell me you aren't."

"Yeah, well. What do you mean by 'taken care of'?"

"I finally found the kid last night. Round two, as it were."

"...and?"

"We made peace," Aikawa said. "He won't kill anyone else. I won't chase him anymore. We made a deal on those terms."

"...and that's it?"

"Yep. My job was to stop the Kyoto Killer. Nobody ever said I had to arrest him. And truth be told, I didn't really want to get into a brawl with the Zerozaki Clan. So this settles the matter for now. For now."

For now.

I didn't want to think about the threat those words contained. It seemed like something I was better off not knowing.

"So there won't be any more murders in Kyoto, at least."

"Exactly. I could never have done it without you. Thanks," she said, managing to make it sound phony.

"Well I sure am glad to hear that. Don't you think it's time Kunagisa came —"

"So," Aikawa said, having none of my vain attempts, "I had a nice long talk with young Hitoshiki about all sorts of things."

"Did you now."

"I did," Aikawa said, sliding closer to me on her knees. "About you, and about you, but mostly about you."

"Oh dear."

That bastard! How could he tell her, of all people...of course, I'd done exactly the same thing to him. Was this what he'd meant by plans of his own?

"I gotta admit," Aikawa said, looking extremely impressed. "That was some fine deducting you did there. And I am not easily impressed. I would never have guessed that Emoto Tomoe was already dead when you left her apartment or that Aoi Mikoko killed herself."

"Spare me the sarcasm, Jun."

"Don't be so serious, jeez. I'm not trying to piss you off here. I just want to be friends. Seriously. But I did want to check one thing..."



"What?"

She didn't answer immediately, like she was studying my reaction.

"About this case," she said, at last.

"You...aren't satisfied with my solution?"

"No...I have no problems with anything you said. I do have problems with you, however."

"....."

"You may have pulled the wool over Zerozaki's eyes, but there's a lot you left out, isn't there?"

"Yes. But all minor details. Nuances not worth explaining, things better left to the imagination. So –"

"For example, why Aoi Mikoko killed Emoto Tomoe."

"...that..."

...was something I had not told Zerozaki.

I had chosen not to explain.

"Or for example, why the lanyard was stolen."

"Well..."

"And even if she left a note, no one as self-centered and apathetic as you would go to the trouble of making Mikoko's suicide look like a murder. But what I really want to know? Is when you first noticed."

I said nothing.

"You make it sound like you only found out the truth when you read her suicide note. But that can't be true," her smile broadened. "So when was it?"

When I still didn't answer, she went on.

"I tend to overestimate people, but even then, I have a high opinion of you," she said. "I find it very hard to believe you failed to notice the truth until you read her note."

"I don't deserve such praise. I'm not that –"

"Then how about some concrete evidence? You told Zerozaki you don't feel anything seeing dead bodies, but that wasn't the part that struck me as most unlike you."

"What was?" I said, knowing full well what she would say in return. "I'm sure I have no idea."

"The first time you talked to Sasa. When she asked about the phone call from Emoto, you said, 'It was definitely her. If I know a person, I never mistake their voice.' Given your notoriously terrible memory, that can't be right at all." She patted me twice on the shoulder, encouragingly. "With a memory like a sieve, how can you say that for sure? How can you be confident in your ability to recognize the voice of someone you only just met, and have never heard over the phone before? Aoi Mikoko only used that trick because she knew your terrible memory would be unable to see through it. So you should definitely have not used the word 'definitely'."

"...point being?"

"My point is, you deliberately lied to Sasa. For what reason? If you ask me, people don't lie about things they don't know, only things they do. The moment Sasa told you that Emoto had been killed, you knew that Aoi had strangled Emoto, and exactly how she'd done the trick with the phones."

Her tone did not leave me much wiggle room.

It was pointless to stay silent. There was nothing more pointless when locked in the gaze of the crimson consultant. So I went for comparative honesty.

"I wouldn't say I figured *everything* out right there and then," I admitted. "I had no proof or anything, just a hunch. A feeling that if she'd done it this way, she could have pulled it off. A vague sort of premonition. Nothing I could say for sure. But, Jun, even if you're right, even if I had figured everything out in that instant...is that a problem?"

"It is! A huge one. I certainly wouldn't mind at all if you'd lied to protect a friend. We all lie for our friends, we all try to save them. But the problem with that is, you and Aoi Mikoko *were not friends*. She may have thought otherwise, but as far as you were concerned, she was just an acquaintance, just a classmate. You

weren't protecting her. You were just delaying."

Buying time.

Time for what?

Time to decide.

Whether to give...or take away.

"And you went after Aoi Mikoko that same day. 'Can you forgive yourself?'"

Had Aikawa had seen me with Mikoko that Saturday? If she'd been following us...I might pick up on Zerozaki's obvious bloodlust, or Muimi's amateurish attempts, but I had no chance of noticing Aikawa if she didn't want to be noticed.

But Aikawa denied it.

"I didn't see it. But I can imagine what you would say. I agree with Zerozaki on this one. I flat out refuse to believe that guilt over having murdered someone would be enough to drive anyone to suicide. People prone to such regrets don't commit murder in the first place."

"But statistics suggest a substantial percentage of murderers kill themselves."

"Statistics? Twenty years of life and that's the best excuse you can come up with?" Aikawa squinted at me scornfully, laughing through her nose. "I don't believe in such idiocy. Things that only happen one time in a million happen the first time. The first person you meet has one in a million qualities. The lower the odds the more likely it is to happen. Statistics? Don't be stupid. Miracles are cheap vending machine fodder."

"....."

This was among the crazier things she'd said, but since Aikawa Jun said it, it was hard to argue with. Nothing I'd experienced left me capable of competing with her.

"Was that a tangent? Anyway, Aoi Mikoko didn't kill herself because of what she'd done. She did it because you interrogated – no, cross-examined her. Leaving her with no choice but death."

Can you forgive yourself?

I'll come by tomorrow around noon. To settle this.

To settle this.

"Because I asked her a few questions? If her conscience could be stirred that easily, she would never have killed her friend," I said, echoing Aikawa's earlier argument. "That's not enough reason to kill y—"

"But Aoi killed Emoto for you."

"....."

"Well, maybe not 'for you'. She did it of her own accord. You share no responsibility. The whole thing beings with plain old jealousy. To be blunt about it."

I couldn't answer.

Aikawa kept talking.

"Emoto Tomoe, who never opened her heart to anybody, who never let anyone get too close to her. But she formed a connection with *you*. On the first night you two met."

A fatal wound. A defective product.

Alike but not alike.

If Mikoko had heard what we talked about while she was asleep, if she had actually been conscious like she was when I dropped her off at Miiko's place...what then?

"This explains the missing lanyard as well. Why did Aoi want something like that? Usami Akihiro gave it to Tomoe. But you told her it looked good. You, who never compliment anyone, complimented Tomoe. That's why she stole it. She didn't need it...she simply wanted to steal it. And so she took it with her. Out of pure jealousy. Aoi Mikoko could not abide the fact that you and Emoto Tomoe got along."

"...so that's why she killed her? That's it? Ridiculous. Being killed for something like that isn't fair the one who gets killed."

"That's right. It isn't fair. That's why you couldn't forgive her. You couldn't forgive Aoi Mikoko for murdering someone for such a stupid reason. And you made her pay for it."

"Do you really think I'd do that?"

"I don't. If this were just a crime of passion, an impulsive act, you would have let it pass – you would have forgiven it. But it wasn't. This was planned. This was no drunken mistake. She had the murder weapon with her from the beginning," Aikawa chuckled. "You know perfectly well she didn't use a *ribbon*. You told Zerosaki she'd taken the ribbon from Usami's present, but that's not true at all."

"We don't know that. She could easily have strangled her with something like that..."

"But the only thing missing from the scene of the crime was the lanyard. According to police records, anyway. There was no missing ribbon. So the murder weapon must be something else. After all, the cloth Aoi used to kill herself was the same as she used to kill Emoto. So what does that mean? Aoi brought the murder weapon with her. She had it before she arrived at Emoto's apartment."

"So?"

"So Aoi had guessed what would happen. She sensed that you and Emoto had something in common. She knew that you would get along. And if she was right, she was resolved to kill Emoto. She planned it all along. Of course she did. Her plan was too complicated to have been improvised by an ordinary college girl."

"If that was the case, I'd have to laugh," I said, not laughing at all. "Killing a friend for no better reason than that, but not lying at all about their friendship. She meant it when she said they were friends, Jun. Mikoko really loved Tomoe."

But not enough to *not* kill her.

Kill her the moment she got in the way.

Murder her.

Die for me.

It was a hell of a thing.

"You took a bit to make up your mind, but in the end, you

decided to condemn Aoi.

"Condemn? I think there's been some misunderstanding here, Jun. I never told her she should commit suicide. What's more, I kept the conversation going until Mikoko had calmed down enough that she would not impulsively kill herself. I provided her with three choices. The first was suicide. The second was turning herself in. And the third was to insist she was innocent, and never speak to me again. There was an extra credit option in which she killed me."

"The last one being your preferred option?"

"Hardly," I said, shrugging. "I came away with the impression that she would turn herself in. But she didn't. When I arrived, I found she had chosen death. That's why..."

"That's why you changed things so it wouldn't look like a suicide. There was nothing like that in the note at all, was there? Did you leave X/Y at the scene, too?"

She was right. Mikoko had not asked for any of this. It was my idea to swallow the evidence. She had simply said that she had chosen not to turn herself in because she didn't want people finding out what she'd done. And I made the decision to help.

And, to be honest, I did feel like it was my fault.

"Your fault? I think that's a phrase you use when you had no way of predicting the outcome."

"It did come as a surprise. It was not what I'd expected. Like you or Zerozaki, I did not think guilt would drive someone to suicide if they were capable of committing murder in the first place. I was surprised to see Mikoko had killed herself. I felt sick, but I can't be sure that was entirely the fault of eating the evidence. It may have been from the shock. I have no way of knowing."

"But Aoi might not have chosen death out of guilt. She may have died because you pressed her, because you hated her, because she'd made an enemy of you, because she had no more hope left."

"If that's the case, I'm even more annoyed. If you're going to kill someone, don't let the consequences drive you to your death."

She didn't have the right to be a killer."

"Oh, so when you say it was your fault, you mean Emoto, not Aoi? I see. That is one way of looking at it. But...does affection really make you feel nothing? It may have resulted in some pretty messed up behavior, but it's also clear that Aoi genuinely loved you."

"I love you so you have to love me too? Like some sort of threat? I'm not big on reciprocity. And I despise people who kill out of lust."

"You said something similar about Atemiya," Aikawa said, gravely. "What I'm most impressed by is that you seemed to have known from the start – you predicted this outcome. That's why you deliberately gave Atemiya false information, and told her it was a dying message. You told Zerozaki she made a mistake, but you made her make that mistake. So that if Atemiya kept things going after Aoi's suicide you would know right away. You broke into Emoto's apartment not because you were trying to solve the case, but because you wanted details they would have kept from you."

"I only meant for it to be insurance...it wasn't as calculated as you suggest. By no means was everyone dancing on the palm of my hand."

She did the killing, he let himself be killed, and the other one killed herself. I did nothing at all. Least of all manipulate them. With as little comprehension of other people's emotions as I had, how was I to begin pulling their strings?

That itself was nonsense.

"Sasa and Kazuhito took Atemiya Muimi into protective custody yesterday. They felt she was a suicide risk. They caught her on the edge of the roof, about to jump. Babbling incoherently; they were unable to get anything useful out of her. They're not sure if she's going to recover."

"...I see."

"What did you say to her?"

"Nothing," I said. "Like I said, I have no interest in people

who kill out of lust."

"I thought you said you despised them."

"You must have misheard me."

Aikawa glared at me in silence for a while, then sighed. "Either way, I guess that's why you condemned the two of them for a single murder, but let Zerozaki's indiscriminate killing spread pass without comment. To give, or to take away...you are a cruel one."

"I'm often told that."

Aikawa finished her Coke, and stood up, looking down at me.

"Dust to dust...fine. No matter what I say or do, your sin and punishment are yours alone. I don't know what you think about it, but you did nothing wrong. If you are to blame for any reason, it's that you are you. You being you is itself a sin, and you being you is punishment enough. I have no intention of saying anything more. I simply was curious...which is what prompts me to one final question."

Her tone was light, like she was joking. But I knew her well enough to know that's when she was at her most serious.

"What?" I asked, tensing myself.

"What did Aoi's note really say?"

"....." I was silent for a moment. "Only one thing," I said, at last.

"Oh? What?"

"I forget. My memory's pretty bad."

"....."

".....I wanted you to save me."

"Oh, that is nasty," she grinned, "Sticks in your heart no matter how you try and ignore it. It would have been so nice if the last thing you'd remembered was her telling you she loved you, but her actual last words were a perfect revenge. You'll never be able to forget her now. And that's exactly what she wanted."

"Oh, I'd give it three days, at most."



I sounded sulky, but I meant it, and expected that to happen. I already had too many unpleasant memories; there wasn't room for more. Bearing one or two or three or four more crosses wouldn't matter much; they'd soon be buried in more. That's just how it went.

Aikawa agreed. She gazed at me in silence for a while, then gave me a cynical smile. "You didn't really mind which, did you?"

"....."

Which what?

There were too many things that could apply to.

But whatever she meant by it...

...whatever those words applied to...

...the answer was the same.

"Right."

I nodded quietly.

"I'll take care of Sasa. Make sure she isn't a problem for you."

"A problem? How?"

"Giving false evidence about Emoto, tampering with the evidence with Aoi on top of talking her into killing herself, and then going after Atemiya while keeping the truth a secret. Normally that would be enough to get you charged with something, as I'm sure you well knew, but I'll take care of that for you. If I didn't, Kunagisa would. But I feel like it might come in handy if you owe me one."

"Sasaki said something similar."

"Yeah, she got that from me."

".....I...see."

I seemed to owe a lot of different people now...I'd only been back in Japan five months. Would I be able to repay everyone before I died?

They would probably make me.

"Well," Aikawa said. "We'll meet again, I'm sure."

"I'd say that seems unlikely."

"Not true! I'm sure we'll see each other very soon."

"That makes it sound like you plan to drop in on me tomorrow."

"I'll be in Hokkaido tomorrow, and the job's a little on the dangerous side. I might not come back alive. Exciting!"

"You won't die no matter who kills you."

"Neither will you."

With that, she waved a hand, and left the room. Like she expected to see me tomorrow.

"....."

We probably would see each other again.

And once again, she would dig deep into the side of me I'd rather keep hidden. Her sarcastic smile would once again definitively end a story that had already ended.

She would solve what had already concluded.

Explain what had already been resolved.

That was the red consultant's role.

Which was,

Of course,

"...you're the one who gets to finish last, Aikawa."

I found myself thinking, quite out of character, that I wouldn't mind if she killed me.

"Okay..."

I looked up at the ceiling. I could reach up my hands and jump and still only reach halfway to it. By sheer cubic space, this room was at least five or ten times the size of my apartment.

Not that it mattered.

"You can come out now, Tomo."

"Yikes!"

I heard her yelp, but she did not actually appear. Apparently she planned to ride it out. She could be kinda dumb for someone so smart. Which was better than being kinda dumb for someone not very smart, like me.

"....."

"Look, if you don't come out, you'll barely be in this book."

"...yeah, but I think I've already blown the timing."

A hatch slid open in the ceiling. A blue-haired girl's face popped out of it, and gave a naughty giggle.

"You knew?"

"I knew. I'm sure Aikawa did, too."

"Ah, and here I was so proud of my secret passage. It's no use, is it?"

And then, for some reason, she dived in my direction, like I was a pool. Like I said, the ceiling was twice as high as I could jump. I didn't dare dodge; I had to stand still and let her slam into my chest.

"Are you okay, Ii-chan!?"

"No..." My fingers were broken, and I couldn't even use my arms to soften the blow. I was just a human cushion. "Tomo...please get off. I think my ribs are broken..."

"I reject this proposition," Tomo said, throwing her arms around me so hard I fell over backwards. Aikawa had done something similar, but this felt completely different; this was an expression of the heart, something much more tender.

"Eh heh heh, it's been much too long. I love you, Ii-chan!"

"...it's not that I don't agree..."

Kunagisa's innocence.

She'd heard everything we said.

And still gave me a hug.

I'd been unspeakable cruel to two people...

...and let a serial killer run free.

Yet she felt no revulsion at all.

"....."

Aikawa had been wrong about one thing.

But I couldn't blame her for that. There were things she fundamentally didn't understand about me. I don't believe for a second that I'm in any way deep, but I know my sins are so great I

deserve nothing from the future. Even the consultant could not see that deep inside me.

I'm reluctant to talk about these things in front of Kunagisa not because I'm afraid she'll reject me. Rather, I know that she won't, and that is why I don't want to show her how cruel I can be, how egotistical I really am.

Her love accepts everything.

It never wavers, no matter what.

Kunagisa would forgive me...

...if she watched me murder someone.

Unconditional love.

That...

...was a bit...

...too much...

...for me.

It felt like it could crush me.

Unquestioning, unwavering love.

It wasn't that I felt no affection for others. I just couldn't handle being loved.

No matter how much love Mikoko gave me, all I could return was hatred towards a murderer. No matter how clearly love had driven her, I could not see that as anything but murder.

That made me a defective product.

Or a human failure.

"...which is nonsense."

"Mm?" Kunagisa said, pulling back just enough to look at me. "Did you say something, Ii-chan?"

"No. Nothing at all."

"Hunh. Okay. Hey, Ii-chan, mind coming with me somewhere soon?"

"Coming with you? Somewhere outside this apartment?"

"Yep. Truth is, I don't want to go, but there's someone who needs my help."

"Okay...then sure, let's do it. I haven't seen you in a while,

after all."

"Great!" Kunagisa smiled happily.  
She was capable of no other expression.  
Just as I was incapable of that one.  
I could not return a smile with a smile...  
That did make me feel inferior, Tomoe.  
I thought, self-deprecatingly.  
"When do we leave?"

"Got to prepare! Dr. Kyoichiro's place is super far. But we've got to save Sa-chan. But we'll need you healed up, so how about early July?"

"Okay, fine."

"Mark your calender!" she giggled.

At this point I remembered something.

"Kunagisa," I said, "Do you know what X/Y is?"

"Mm?" she looked puzzled. "Is that math?"

"A dying message...well, not really, but imagine it is."

"Hmm," she said, thinking for exactly one second. "Is this cursive?"

"Yes."

"That makes it easy. Look at it in a mirror. Then spin it."

She said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Exactly," I said.

What had Mikoko been thinking when she wrote it? When she'd left it next to Tomoe's body, like a dying message? I could only guess, but I could guess.

Mikoko had most likely...

...not wanted to kill Tomoe at all.

Just as Muimi...

...had not wanted to kill Akiharu.

"...but I..."

I had really wanted...

...to kill Mikoko and Muimi.

When I looked into a mirror I saw a psycho killer.

"....."

I had read her paradoxical message loud and clear. If only that had been enough. But it could only reach the side of me beyond the mirror, and that mirror had already shattered.

A world had shattered.

So...

I looked at Kunagisa.

So when would I shatter?

The cursed psychic had said I'd last at least two years. But she was more of a liar than I've ever been, so may not have told the truth. Even if she'd told the truth I found it hard to believe my mind would last that long.

Even if my mind did, my heart would not.

Either way, the time would surely come.

The final judgment, as it were.

"What's wrong, Li-chan?" Kunagisa said.

Her eyes big and wide.

Blue hair.

Just like five years ago.

Just like five years from now.

The time will come.

The burden will be too much...

...and I'll want to destroy her.

Will I?

"....."

...she'll forgive me if I do.

She'll forgive me if I kill her. If I ruin her. Like she did five years ago, she'll turn that innocent smile towards me, as if nothing happened at all.

Being forgiven and being saved are different.

The difference may seem like nonsense.

But before that happens...

Not out of lust, but because of some primal need...

I must...

I need to be...

"Tomo."

"Mm?"

"I love you."

I just said it.

It...

...meant nothing...

...hollow, empty words.

Anyone could say them.

To anyone at all.

Words...

...without worth.

But Kunagisa...

Just laughed.

"I love you too," she said.

That's all there was to it.

"That's why I love you, li-kun."

That's why "I wanted you to save me."

I had only one answer to that.

One word for Mikoko.

The same thing Tomoe said to me.

A word...

...that feels natural to me.

"No."

<Easy Love, Easy No> is BAD END.....

## Afterword

So they often say "The ends justify the means," but as human beings, I think we ought to pick the means more carefully. If you think about it seriously, there are any number of cases where any means necessary would have cause all kinds of problems. If you want to be a baseball player, the only reasonable means is to play a shitload of baseball. If you were all like, anything goes, and bought a rugby ball, then you're much more likely to become a rugby player. Or what if you bought a knife, and swung it a thousand times every day. If you saw someone doing that in the park would you think they had a future in the major leagues? I know that's not what the expression really means, but the idea amused me.

This book is a classic example of getting to an end by any means, but come to think of it, I'm not sure I had any role in picking those means. "Why did you want this to happen?" is not a question I'm prepared to answer. It's like they're asking the reasons for my reasons, or the reasons for the reasons for my reasons, and so on until silence is the only possible response. Actually, if anyone could actually explain themselves to that degree it would be exceedingly horrifying. Humans should be human, and accept that their purpose and goals are both works of fiction.

In *Strangulation Romanticist* we find a psycho killer who has lost his purpose, and a killer who found no means. Both knew something was wrong, but were unable to stop themselves; the killer kept trying in vain, while the psycho never found a purpose. And a side player in their stories, our narrator, looks at them, thought they were wrong, saw himself in them, hated himself, and came to the conclusion that there's nothing worse than looking in the mirror if you have anything you dislike about yourself. But without a mirror, you have no way of seeing yourself.

Like my last work, *The Beheading Cycle*, there is no end to



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Nisio Isin